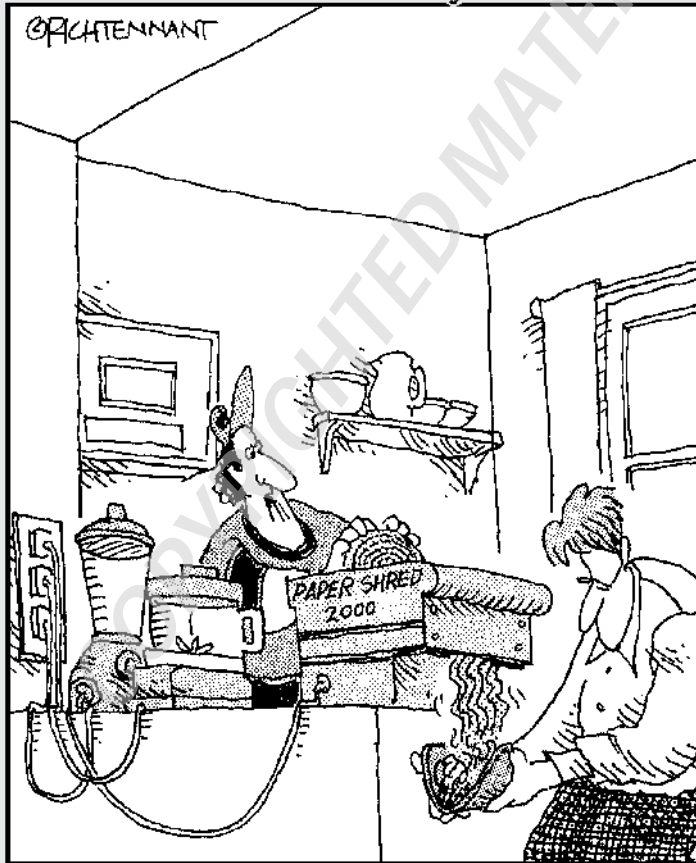


Book I

Mexican Cooking

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Let me know when you've got enough
lettuce on that taco."

In this book . . .

jAye caramba! Americans tend to think that Mexican food is too spicy, too heavy, and too hard to prepare at home. Nothing could be farther from the truth. If you're ready to put your preconceived notions aside and cook some flavorful, healthy, easy-to-fix Mexican meals, then you've turned to the right section of this book. We give you an overview of what *really* goes into a delicious Mexican meal, help you to master Mexican cooking techniques, and then dive right in to the recipes. From great guacamole to an amazing Margarita Sorbet, we help you plan the perfect Mexican feast!

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Chapter 1

Understanding Mexican Cooking

In This Chapter

- ▶ Debunking common Mexican food myths
 - ▶ Getting a taste for Mexican cooking
-

Experiencing pasta overload? Burnt out on grilled chicken breasts and left cold by one more turkey burger? Ready to take a culinary adventure full of sizzle and spunk, exciting seasonings, terrific party foods, and world-class cocktails? Open your heart, mind, and kitchen to Mexican food, and your guests and family will thank you a thousand times.

Forget about those cheesy restaurant combination platters of yesterday, with their heaping portions of rice, beans, and fried foods. Our style of Mexican cooking is much lighter than that, and it can be as hot and spicy as you like. Big flavors, inexpensive ingredients, easy preparation, and casual presentation are what our kind of Mexican cooking is all about.

Before you begin your journey into Mexican cooking, we want to fill you in on a couple of things to get you started out right, including blasting a few myths about Mexican cooking and giving you a few hints about how to approach this great cuisine.

Dispelling Mexican-Cooking Myths

Although it's one of the world's most beloved cuisines, Mexican food has been severely misunderstood and sloppily translated north of the border. Here are a few myths you can toss aside when you start cooking with us.

- ✓ **Myth #1: Mexican food is too spicy.** To think of Mexican food as merely hot and spicy is to oversimplify a complicated set of sensations. The great traditional foods of Mexico are a complex blend of savory and earthy flavors, with chopped condiments and spicy salsas generally served on the side as a seasoning and for textural contrast.

For some reason, perhaps because it was a hot concept that could be easily communicated, spiciness became the defining characteristic of all things Mexican in the United States. It just ain't so.

- ✔ **Myth #2: Mexican food is too heavy.** Old-fashioned Mexican-American restaurant food is heavy. Real Mexican food and the modern updates we favor feature lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, herb garnishes, fresh chopped salsas, rice, beans, tortillas, and a small serving of meat or chicken. Modern Mexican cuisine is light and healthful, with a large dose of flavor.

All that sour cream and melted cheese associated with Mexican food is actually an American restaurant innovation. Typical corn and tortilla snacks, such as enchiladas, tacos, and quesadillas, are meant to be delicate, nutrient-dense morsels, not leaden doorstops.

- ✔ **Myth #3: Mexican food is hard to cook.** It's ironic that such a rustic, family style of cooking is intimidating to American home cooks. For many, it remains a food to go out to restaurants for rather than something to cook at home. One reason may be the exacting authenticity demanded by stern cookbook authors who shall remain nameless.

When you gain experience handling a few unfamiliar ingredients and start keeping them on hand, Mexican cooking should fit right into your already overflowing schedule. The Mexican food we love has its roots in the home kitchen and the market, with no fancy last-minute techniques or special equipment necessary to create great soul-satisfying dishes.

Getting Started with Mexican Cooking

Cooking a new cuisine, like speaking a new language, can be intimidating. Here are some pointers for taking those first few tentative steps.

- ✔ **Keep the food manageable.** Start small, with familiar, accessible foods like tacos or marinated and grilled meats with salsas. (Look in Chapter 4 of Book I for salsas and tacos and Chapter 5 for meaty recipes.) Save the more technique-intensive recipes for later when you have a weekend to tool around the kitchen and linger over a pot of stew.
- ✔ **Experiment with chiles.** Get to know one or two chiles well — serranos and poblanos are a good place to start. After you feel comfortable with your “starter chiles,” branch out to other, more exotic chiles. The techniques for roasting, peeling, and seeding are the same no matter what kind of chile you cook with. Chapter 3 of Book I gives you all kinds of helpful hints on working with chiles.

- ✔ **Entertain Mexican style.** If you're a weekend cook, increase your popularity by entertaining Mexican style. You can't go wrong with chips, salsas, guacamole, two or three kinds of tacos, and a pitcher full of margaritas in the house.
- ✔ **Keep your mind (and mouth) open to new experiences.** Be daring: Taste that goat taco at the ethnic food stand, mix up a drink with dried hibiscus flowers, and surprise your friends with homemade tamales or salsas during the holidays. Mexican food is all about expanding your horizons and breaking out of familiar food habits — for the fun of it!

Seeking out great tastes in Mexico

You may be lucky enough to travel to Mexico and experience the great flavors of the country firsthand. If so, we have a few tips to help you find wonderful, authentic foods.

Tourism plays such a large part in the Mexican economy that certain places have been developed specifically to make tourists feel at home, or not quite in Mexico. Destinations like Acapulco, Puerto Vallarta, Baja, Cancun, and Cozumel may be great for kicking back and sipping margaritas by the pool; but if it's a culinary adventure you're after, you're unlikely to find it in those sanitized, prepackaged locales. Twenty minutes outside of town, however, it's another story.

The best way to sniff out real regional foods is to visit the main marketplace, usually located near the center of town, or *zocalo* (*zoh-ka-low*). Inside the market, and along the streets surrounding it, you can find vendors at stands, pushing carts, or stationed on blankets on the street, who sell the very best, homemade regional specialties. The cart may be tattered and worn, but as long as it looks clean, we don't hesitate to order up whatever may be offered. Chances are it's delicious.

For scrumptious street snacking, you can't go wrong with roasted corn slathered with mayonnaise, lime juice, and cayenne; cold mango on a stick; any fruit juice or liquado; salted tamarind seeds; garbanzos roasted in the shell; and beautifully sliced and seasoned fruit.

We recommend *A Cook's Tour of Mexico*, by Nancy Zaslavsky (published by St. Martin's Press), to the seriously food-possessed. This Angeleno has traveled extensively over a 20-year period to complete her research. She can tell you where to go in each region for the best marketplaces, vendors, snack stands, and informal restaurants for a truly authentic dining experience in Mexico.

Our favorite regions for authentic food are the southern state of Oaxaca, with its ancient mole (*mo-lay*) recipes and active Zapotec culture, and the Yucatán, along the Caribbean coast, with its super citrus-marinated seafood and lightly grilled foods.

Chapter 2

Ingredients for Mexican Cooking

In This Chapter

- ▶ Stocking the pantry for everyday cooking
 - ▶ Demystifying the almighty chile
-

Mexican cooking doesn't call for a wide array of esoteric ingredients. In Mexican cooking, you use common fruits and vegetables, such as chiles and tomatoes; easy-to-find cuts of meat; inexpensive cooking oils and vinegars; and a few seeds and spices. The secret to successful Mexican cooking lies in the care and time you take transforming these simple ingredients into exotic dishes. To us, the end result of working with the ingredients of the Mexican kitchen is always magic.

Fruits and Vegetables

Fresh fruits and vegetables are an integral part of everyday eating in Mexico. Tropical fruits like mango, pineapple, guava, and watermelon — beautifully sliced and seasoned — are sold on the street as snacks and pureed into mouthwatering drinks at juice stands all over Mexico.

And vegetables aren't sad little afterthoughts that appear alongside a big serving of meat. They're sliced, diced, and pureed into sauces, stews, and garnishes that make any vegetarian smile. Mexicans also eat vegetables such as cucumbers and jícama as snacks throughout the day.

Avocado

Pebbly-skinned greenish brown Hass (rhymes with pass) avocados are our first choice for Mexican cooking. Their rich, nutty flesh strikes the perfect

balance with fiery Mexican foods, and this avocado is irreplaceable for guacamole, salads, sandwiches, tacos, and soups.

If you can't find high-quality Hass avocados, our second favorite type is the leaner, smooth-skinned Fuerte. Its flesh is more watery and its seed is bigger.

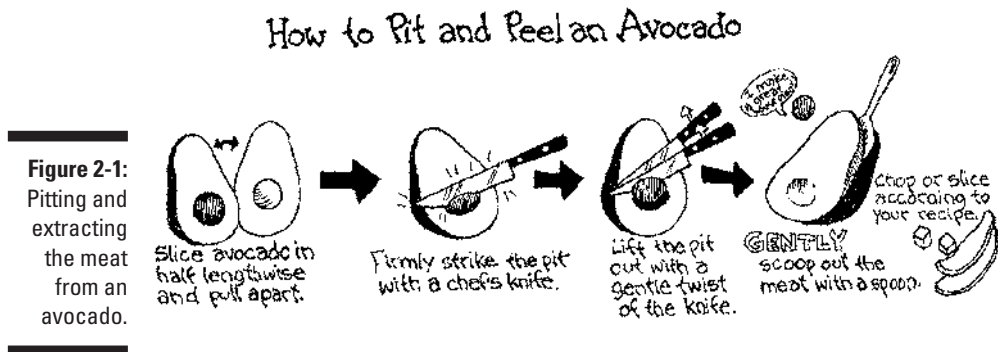
When shopping for avocados, remember to not judge this fruit by its cover. The condition of the skin isn't necessarily an indication of what lies within. Sometimes scaly, blemished skin covers luxurious flesh.

For judging ripeness, we rely on the squeeze test. If the flesh has a little give when you press it with a finger, plan on using the avocado within a day. However, if it puts up no resistance and squishes beneath your thumb, put it back. The flesh inside is probably already turning brown and losing its flavor.

Rock-hard fruit takes about a week to ripen. To ripen avocados, store them in a sealed brown bag on the counter for about a week. Placing an apple in the bag speeds up the process.

To remove the pit from an avocado and extract the meat, follow these steps (see Figure 2-1):

1. **Cut the avocado in half lengthwise and pull the halves apart.**
2. **Place the half with the pit in it on a counter and hit the pit with the sharp edge of a heavy knife until it plunges in.**
3. **Twist the blade to remove the pit.**
4. **Scoop out the meat with a spoon.**



After you cut an avocado, the flesh spoils quickly. To slow the aging process, you can sprinkle the flesh with lemon or lime juice or cover the avocado skin-tight with plastic wrap and store the fruit in the fridge.

Banana leaves

Large, green banana leaves are available year-round in the freezer section of Latin American markets. Banana leaves are popular in the southern and Gulf coast states for wrapping fish, tamales, pork, and chicken. In addition to keeping foods moist, these fragrant green leaves impart a delicious fruity flavor. You can also use them to line and cover pans for roasting meats.

To soften banana leaves for folding, use a knife to trim out and discard the tough stalk in the center. Then pass the leaf over a low gas or electric burner for less than a minute until it becomes pliable. Because the leaves are huge, trim them into 9-inch squares for wrapping. Unused leaves can be tightly wrapped and stored in the freezer for several months.

If you can't find banana leaves, briefly blanched collard greens are a good substitute. Trim and discard any tough stems so that the leaves are pliable.

Cactus paddles

The type of cactus most often eaten in Mexico is the prickly pear, the one traditionally pictured in movies about the Old West. Mexican cooks simply go into their front or backyards and cut off the tender, young paddles, no larger than about 6 × 8 inches, as needed.

Look for cactus paddles, or *nopales* (noh-pahl-es), also from the prickly pear, at farmers markets or ethnic grocers. They're usually sold already cleaned (with their needles removed), in plastic bags. The best, freshest paddles are bright green and firm and reverberate when flicked with a finger.

You may have to buy your cactus paddles au naturel and clean them yourself. The best way to remove the needles is to shave across the paddle with a sharp paring knife. Store the cleaned paddles in plastic bags in your refrigerator's vegetable bin.

Our favorite way to cook 'em is grilled. Boiling, which some cookbooks recommend, enhances their okralike quality, but we don't recommend it.

Chayote

This pale green, pear-shaped squash was one of the principal foods of Central America's Aztec and Mayan people. We admire the bland little vegetable for its versatility, easy preparation, and low cost. Also known as the *mirliton* in Louisiana, the chayote mixes the mild taste of zucchini with the firmer texture of kohlrabi. It's low in calories and an excellent source of potassium.

You can use chayote in any recipe calling for a summer squash such as zucchini; everything, including the large seed in the center, is edible. You can also eat it raw in salads.

Look for chayote year-round in Latin and Asian markets. Choose small, unblemished squashes and store them in your refrigerator's vegetable bin for as long as a month.

Corn husks

Supermarkets sell packaged dried cornhusks year-round. They're the traditional wrappers for tamales, but you can use them to wrap other foods for steaming or grilling. (Achiote-marinated fish strips for the steamer and slices of lime-marinated pork loin for the grill are two mouthwatering examples.) Corn husks protect tender foods as they cook while infusing them with corn essence.

One package of husks is usually enough to wrap about a dozen tamales. Store dry husks in an airtight package in the pantry for as long as a year.

Always soak dried husks in hot water before using them — they need to soak for at least two hours. Choose the largest pieces for wrapping and shred thin strings from the edges for tying tamale packages closed.

Jícama

Jícama (*hee-ka-ma*) is one root vegetable it pays to know. This plain, round, brown-skinned root yields crisp, white flesh that's terrific for adding sparkle to salads and raw vegetable platters.

Like water chestnuts in Chinese cooking, jícama is primarily a texture food. In Mexico, jícama is cut into sticks; sprinkled with salt, cayenne, and lime juice; and sold on the street as a snack. Because its flavor is rather bland (it's mildly sweet like a water chestnut), it needs at least some salt and lemon or lime to perk it up.

Look for jícama in your supermarket's produce section. Always remove the fibrous brown skin with a knife and, after you cut it, cover the flesh with plastic wrap to avoid drying. You can store jícama in your refrigerator's vegetable bin for a few days.

Lime

Mexican cooks use the yellow-skinned key lime, or *limón*, because it tastes sweeter than the limes typically eaten elsewhere. They use limes for marinating fish and chicken, perking up salsas, garnishing soups, and balancing margaritas, among other uses.



If you can't find key limes in your local supermarket, you can create a similar taste at home. Just mix half lemon juice and half lime juice anytime a recipe calls for lime juice to get closer to the true Mexican flavor.

In the United States, the green Persian lime is the most widely available lime. Persian limes can be disappointingly hard, juiceless, and expensive to boot. Choose them wisely: Look for small, soft, thin-skinned fruit, with a yellowish tint in the supermarket or farmers market.

Store limes in a bowl or basket on the countertop. Don't put them in the refrigerator — they go bad faster in there!

We prefer to juice limes by hand (see Figure 2-2). Roll them on the counter first, bearing down to break up the juice sacs. Then cut the lime in half across its width, and holding a half in one hand, plunge the tines of a fork into the pulp. Twist the fork to loosen the juice, and pour into a bowl.

How to Juice a Lime

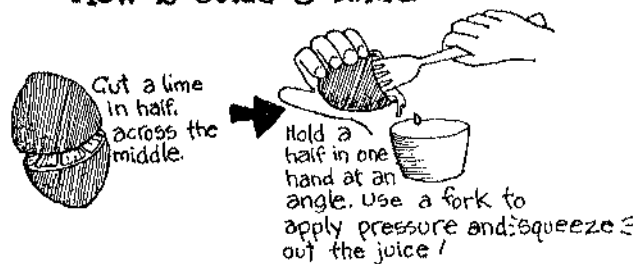


Figure 2-2:
Juicing a
lime.

If juicing a quantity of limes in advance, you can store the juice in a sealed jar in the refrigerator up to two days. Or, if your quantity is really large, transfer the juice to freezer bags and freeze it. For smaller portions, freeze the juice in ice cube trays. You never want to be caught without lime juice.

Plantains

These large, thick, cooking bananas are a staple food in the Caribbean, where they're fried, mashed, boiled, simmered, pureed, and baked into soups, stews, breads, and side dishes. Although the plantain is classified as a fruit, like the banana, Caribbean cooks, including those of Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, use plantains more as a starchy root vegetable, like a yam.

The trick to handling plantains is knowing their stages of ripeness. Their color ranges from green when picked to black when thoroughly ripe, and although you can cook them at every stage, they only turn sweet when their skin has entirely blackened and their starch has turned to sugar. A cooked green plantain more closely resembles a potato than a banana.

If you plan to enjoy them sweet, purchase plantains that are yellow to black rather than entirely green because green fruit may be difficult to ripen. To speed up the ripening process, store fruit wrapped in newspapers or a brown paper bag out of sunlight, and add an apple if you want to speed up the ripening process. Look for plantains in the supermarket or Latin markets.

Tomatillos

These small, pale green fruits are the key to most green salsas. Though they resemble green tomatoes when out of the husk, tomatillos are acidic, pale-green members of the Cape Gooseberry family, and bear no relation to tomatoes.

Look for tomatillos that are small, not rock hard, and still in the husk in your supermarket's produce section. Store tomatillos, in the husk, in your refrigerator's vegetable bin. When you're ready to use them, just pull off the papery husks with your fingers and rinse off the fruit's naturally sticky coating with cold water.

Our favorite way to eat tomatillos is raw or very briefly cooked in order to retain their crunch and spunky bright flavor. Try them chopped in place of the tomatoes in Fresh Salsa (Chapter 4 of Book I) or diced and marinated in some lime juice and olive oil and spooned over raw oysters.

Revisiting Chiles 101

Though chile peppers are enjoyed all over the world (China, Thailand, India, and Korea are big chile-growing and -eating countries), no other country matches Mexico's passion for them. Mexican farmers grow more than

140 varieties, and Mexican cooks are legendary for their skilled appreciation of every facet (not just the heat) of this complex vegetable that's technically a fruit.

Chiles have been misunderstood as an ingredient, perhaps because of their striking heat. If you stop to appreciate chiles, you start to notice a wide range of exotic flavors. From snappy, sparkly jalapeños to smoky chipotles and earthy poblanos, chiles are a light, healthful way to bring a wide range of strong, new flavors to your cooking. Just start with a little at a time, find out what you like, and don't let all the macho hype about the heat deter you.

If you're totally new to chiles and you're the type who likes to dip a toe in the water before diving in, start out gently. Try adding a dried chile or two to a pot of your favorite soup or stew and let it steep until it plumps up. Then remove the chile before serving. The flavor of the chile infuses the broth, but doesn't scorch anyone with a mouthful of heat.

Shopping for chiles

The names of chiles aren't consistent all over the United States, so study the chart in the upcoming "Identifying the types of chiles" section, and judge chiles by their appearance and taste, not only their name.

A general rule for predicting the flavor and heat of a chile is the smaller the chile, the hotter the heat. Red indicates a ripe, and probably sweeter, chile than green. Cutting off and tasting a tiny piece of a slice of fresh chile is really the best way to predict its heat and flavor when cooked.

When purchasing fresh chiles, look for bright, smooth, shiny skin and buy about a week's supply. Store the chiles in your refrigerator's vegetable bin and rinse them before using.

Dried chiles should be fragrant and flexible enough to bend without breaking. Look for unbroken chiles that aren't too dusty. (Because chiles are dried outdoors, they can become dirty and dusty, and you need to wipe them off before using them.) Store dried chiles in airtight bags in the freezer and let them soften a minute or two at room temperature before using. (See "Plumping up dried chiles" on the following page for more information.)

Handling fresh chiles

After chopping or otherwise handling chiles, you want to be mindful of the other surfaces that have come in contact with cut chiles. The hot oils from the cut chiles spread like, you guessed it, wildfire.

Immediately after handling chiles, wash off your cutting boards, knives, and hands with hot, soapy water. Be careful not to touch your face or eyes before hand washing because chile oil in the eye isn't fun.

Some cooks like to wear gloves when handling chiles, and other cooks coat their hands with a layer of cooking oil to protect them. Just wash with soap and water to remove the oil.

Plumping up dried chiles

Dried chiles are often rehydrated by taking a long soak in hot water or stock before joining the dish. Softening a not-too-hard chile takes about 20 minutes. Read the recipe thoroughly before tossing out the soaking liquid because this chile-infused liquid is often called for later in the recipe.

Dried chiles have a whole other texture and taste. Don't use dried chiles as a substitute for fresh chiles. You can toast dried chiles to improve flavor just like fresh chiles (see Chapter 3 of Book I), and you can remove the seeds to reduce heat.

Identifying the types of chiles

In our cooking, we rely on the nine types of chiles described in the following list and shown in Figure 2-3:

- ✔ **Ancho:** Anchos are the dried version of our favorite green chile, the poblano. This wrinkled, red-brown, wide-shouldered chile has a mellow, sweet flavor, similar to a bell pepper, with just a touch of heat. We like to add it, julienned, to sauces for its chewy texture or pureed at the beginning of a sauce to add body and pure chile flavor.
- ✔ **Chile de arbol:** Arbols, also known as dried red chiles, are the papery thin, long, dried chiles sold by the bag in the supermarket. Used extensively in Chinese and Mexican cooking (they put the pow in Kung Pau chicken), these inexpensive little chiles pack a powerful punch of heat, especially after they're chopped and cooked. To tame their heat, you can add them whole to stews and soups and remove them before serving.
- ✔ **Chile negro or dried pasilla:** This long, narrow, dark brown chile is a dried chilaca chile. Similar in flavor to the more popular ancho, pasillas are often used in combination with other dried chiles in traditional moles. Look for them via mail order or in ethnic markets.

- ✓ **Chipotle:** Chipotles, or dried, smoked, red jalapeños, are one of those life-changing ingredients. When we tasted chipotle salsa, on our first tasting expedition to Mexico back in 1984, we never looked back. We've been using these wrinkled, reddish-brown chiles to add a mysterious, smoky, sweet flavor to everything from salad dressings to grilled chicken and salsas ever since.

Though usable as a substitute, canned chipotles en adobo (dried chiles packed in a sweet, sour, spicy sauce) are quite different. They're actually hotter and their texture is softer. If you use chipotles en adobo, wipe them off to remove excess sauce and reduce by half the quantity called for in the recipe.

- ✓ **Habañero:** This chile lives up to its reputation. It's pure heat. Along with the Scotch Bonnet, the habañero is considered the world's hottest chile. These small, lantern-shaped (usually) chiles are most often used in the Yucatán. You can shop for them at Latin and farmers markets where their color can range from dark green to orange and even red. We prefer the taste of fresh rather than dried habañeros and recommend substituting a larger quantity of serranos (seeds and all) in a pinch.

- ✓ **Jalapeño, red and green:** The jalapeño, America's favorite chile, is thick-fleshed, small (about 3-inch long), and bright green or red. With its sweet, fresh, garden flavor and medium heat, this versatile chile is great for garnishing just about anything. In Mexico, we've even seen jalapeños eaten as an accompaniment to rich stews and tacos. They're easy to find at the market, but you can substitute serranos if you prefer.

Canned jalapeños aren't a good substitute for fresh peppers because their taste and texture are quite different.

- ✓ **Morita:** These small, brown, dried chiles look like thin chipotles but are less smoky with a spicier taste. They're a variety of dried, smoked jalapeños. Use fewer moritas to replace chipotles in a recipe.
- ✓ **Poblano:** These dark green, medium-sized, thick-fleshed chiles are our favorite fresh green peppers for cooking. We feature them in soups, sauces, and chilis; and they're always our first choice for stuffing because of their wide shoulders, thick skin, and smoldering flesh. They're superb as *rajas* (roasted pepper strips) because of their meatiness.

Look for smooth-skinned poblano chiles with nice wide shoulders for stuffing. You can substitute less spicy, skinnier Anaheims for stuffing, but you can easily find poblanos in a well-stocked supermarket.

- ✓ **Serrano:** Small, thin serranos are similar to jalapeños but pack a little more punch. We mostly use the green variety (the reds are a bit sweeter) in salsas and as a raw garnish in salads and soups. They're easy to find at the supermarket, and you can use them interchangeably with jalapeños.



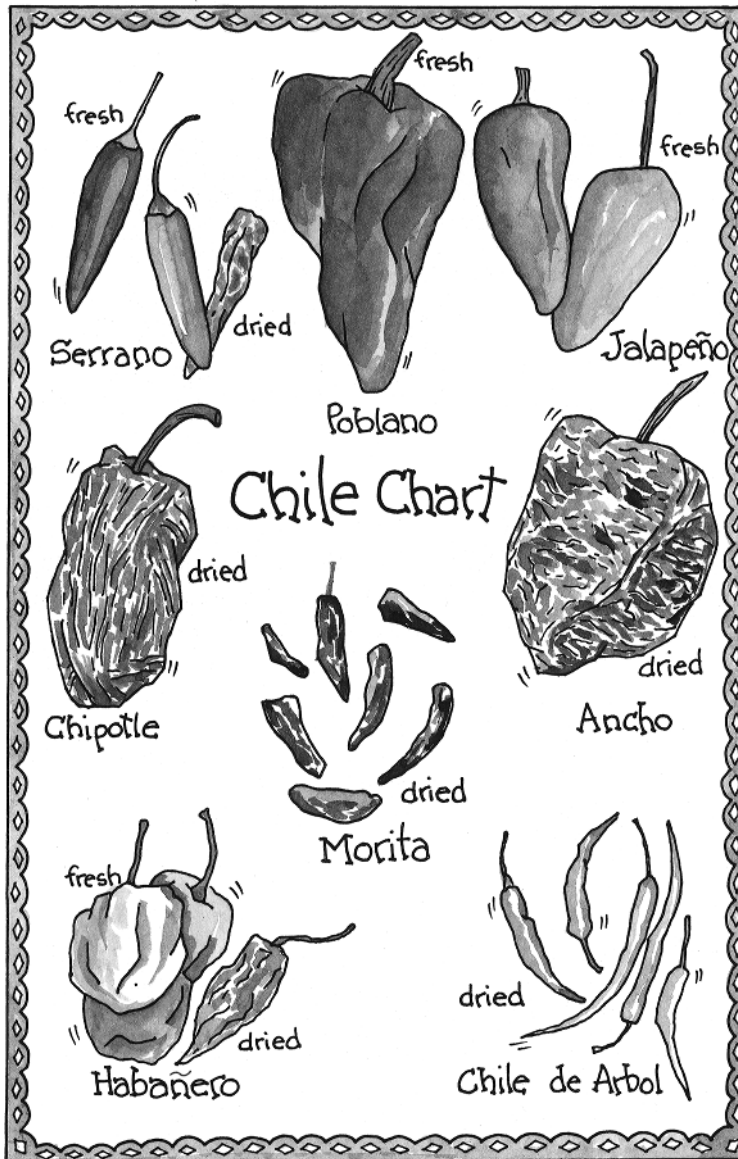


Figure 2-3:
Consult this
chart when
shopping for
chiles.

Herbs and Spices

If the variety of herbs on the market makes you feel insecure, you can relax. The Mexican kitchen uses the same three herbs over and over again: cilantro, oregano (fresh and dried), and epazote. If you start cooking Mexican often,

you may want to buy a few of these easy-to-grow plants for the garden and save last-minute shopping trips.

The Mexican spice shelf is reassuringly short: cumin for savor and cinnamon for sweetness. The magic lies in how these spices are combined with chiles, salt, pepper, assorted seeds, and other flavorings to make this simple soul-satisfying cuisine.

Cilantro

Cilantro is one of those ingredients that arouses emotions. People either love it or hate it, and it's not easy to change a hater's taste. Still, we recommend that you give this unique flavor a few chances if you don't immediately care for it. It just may grow on you.

On the other hand, if the thought of a cilantro leaf passing your lips still makes you quiver after a few tastes, please don't give up on Mexican (or Thai or Chinese) food. Simply replace it with flat-leaf parsley or an herb that you love, and, if anybody asks, tell him or her that two highly trained chefs gave you permission.

Because cilantro is so delicate, it's best not to chop it in advance. Likewise, don't stress about removing the thin stems; they're entirely edible. Don't ever use dried cilantro to replace fresh. This herb doesn't dry well.

Epazote

Stronger tasting than most herbs, epazote grows like the weed that it is all over North America. You may have a difficult time finding it in the supermarket (though you're liable to find it in the weeds growing alongside the highway in Los Angeles), but you can easily grow it from seed in the garden or a pot. We've tried the dried variety and don't recommend it because it's virtually flavorless.

The flavor of fresh epazote is so dominant that you should use it alone, not in combination with other herbs, when flavoring a dish. In Mexico, cooks often use it to complement mushrooms, black beans, squash, and even quesadillas.

When cooking with epazote, always trim off the tough stem.

Oregano

Oregano, familiar from Italian-American cooking, is the most popular herb in the Mexican kitchen. Thirteen varieties of this small, soft, green-leafed plant

grow in Mexico. Look for it in your supermarket's produce section, and always remove the leaves from the tough stems.

Mexican cooks also use dried oregano. You can purchase cellophane bags of Mexican dried oregano, containing larger pieces of leaves and stems, and crumble the large pieces by hand before adding or just use common dried oregano. We sometimes add a smoky edge by toasting the dried herb first in a dry skillet over low heat.

Cumin

If we had to pick the one fragrance that instantly identifies Mexican food, it would be cumin. We recommend using this spice liberally in your Mexican cooking, combined with cinnamon, nutmeg, cayenne, and arbol chiles for a sweet, spicy kick, or combined with onion, garlic, ground ancho, paprika, and cayenne for a full, earthy, chile flavor.

Use it ground, if you want its flavor to pervade the dish, and always develop the flavor by cooking it first in fat. Use about 1 teaspoon of whatever fat is in the dish to each teaspoon of spice. If it's just dropped into a bubbling soup or stew, the flavor never goes as deep. Use cumin seeds whole when you're looking for an assertive pop of flavor when you take a bite.

As with all dried spices, you can purchase cumin in small enough quantities to last on your shelf no longer than six months. Store out of sunlight and check expiration dates in the store before purchasing. You're likely to find fresher cumin in an Indian or Mexican market where cooks purchase it a lot.

Cinnamon

Mexican cooks use cinnamon, known as *canela* in Spanish, to flavor both savorys and sweets. The thin, papery, brown bark known as Mexican cinnamon has a rougher edge and is less expensive than the tightly wound variety commonly found in the supermarket. Look for the Mexican variety (actually from Sri Lanka), packed in hanging cellophane bags, in the ethnic section of the market. Use the bark to infuse drinks, stews, moles, and sauces and then discard it. Ground cinnamon can always be used in its place.

Store cinnamon in airtight containers away from the sun, and replenish after about six months because the bark dries out.

Nuts, Seeds, and Seasoning Pastes

Nuts and seeds are much more than a snack food or dessert ingredient in the Mexican kitchen. Since pre-Columbian times, cooks have used peanuts, pecans, and pumpkin seeds to thicken sauces and moles. And the Spanish influence can be seen in the use of almonds and walnuts in rich ground-nut sauces and stuffings.

Annatto seed and achiote paste

These tiny, rock hard, brick red seeds from the South American annatto tree give Mexican food its characteristic orange tint. The seeds alone have a slightly musky flavor, but when ground and combined with garlic, oregano, cumin, cinnamon, pepper, and cloves, they make fragrant achiote paste, a seasoning mixture popular in the Yucatán for marinades and sauces.

Annatto seed, available in ethnic markets and by mail order, is used by U.S. food producers to add an orange tint to butter and cheddar cheese. You can use the seeds to flavor oil by simply heating them in the oil and then straining out the seeds, or you can grind them in a coffee or spice grinder and use them to color masa for tamales. Always cook annatto or achiote in fat to remove any chalkiness.

Achiote paste, sold in bricks in Mexican markets, is an easy-to-use spice rub for fish and meats. When the paste is thinned with vinegar or citrus juices, the spices develop a wonderful tropical fruitiness. Achiote paste can be kept, well wrapped, in the refrigerator for a long time.



Be sure to wash off any utensils or cutting boards that come into contact with annatto or achiote right away. There's a reason this is an industrial-strength dye. A little goes a long way.

Tamarind seeds and paste

Tamarind is a leathery, dried brown seed pod that produces a deliciously sticky, sweet-sour paste when cooked. One of the key ingredients in Worcestershire sauce, it's popular in Indian, Mexican, Indonesian, and Thai cuisines as a tart balance to fatty foods. You can find it in brick and pod form in ethnic markets.

To reconstitute dried tamarind pods, first remove the hard outer pods by hand and discard them. Place the fruit in a pan, generously cover with water, and cook at a boil about 15 minutes, until soft. Strain before using. The finished paste should be the consistency of ketchup.



Soak bricks of tamarind pulp in hot water to soften about 30 minutes and then press through a strainer to separate any solids from the thick puree.

A good substitute for tamarind paste is pureed, dried apricots, enhanced with some lemon juice.

Coconut

Coconuts are available year-round in the supermarket. The best ones feel heavy in your hand and sound full of liquid when shaken. If the eyes are soft and the coconut smells spoiled when you sniff it, chances are that it's rotten inside.

In some Latin markets, coconuts are sold already husked and wrapped to go in plastic. But if you can't get to a Latin market, here's how to get to that sweet, white meat: Poke a hole in two or three eyes with a screwdriver or ice pick and drain the liquid. Place the coconut on a baking tray in a 350-degree oven for about 10 minutes, and then remove it and crack it open with a hammer on the floor (to avoid damage to your kitchen counters).

For delicious, large shards of coconut meat ready-to-go, shop for unsweetened, shaved (not shredded) coconut in health-food markets. Store the coconut in plastic bags in the freezer.

Pepitas

Pumpkin seeds, or pepitas, are native to Mexico and show up in sauces, salads, moles, and, of course, snack foods. The seeds sold in Mexico, often with the thin, white husks still on, have much more flavor than those sold in the United States. The thin husks are edible.

Like all seeds and nuts, pepitas should be stored in airtight containers in the freezer. They need not be defrosted before using.

Beans and Starches

These beans and starches are the simple and substantial backbones of every Mexican meal. No good Mexican cook is ever without them.

Beans

The two beans Americans most often associate with Mexican cooking are black beans and larger mottled pink pintos, but in Mexico, people enjoy a wider variety. Beans and rice are served at virtually every meal to ensure a daily dose of protein in diets that don't depend upon a large portion of meat.

Most important when shopping for beans is to purchase from a store that does a brisk business. Beans can age, which makes them impossible to ever cook up soft — and you can't spot these little scoundrels before they're cooked.

If you don't have time for all the boiling dried beans require, you can always substitute a good canned bean. A good way to enhance the flavor of canned beans is to sauté a clove or two of garlic with a chopped onion in some oil until they're soft and nearly brown. Add this mixture to the beans with their cooking liquid and warm through.

Tortillas

You can't eat Mexican food without tortillas. Would you ask a Frenchman to sit down to a meal without his baguette? Not only are tortillas the sustaining bread of the Mexican people, but they also make a darn good fork in a pinch. Just hold the tortilla in your hand and pinch the food in between for instant taco transport.

If you do much cooking, you should stock up on large packs of 6-inch taco-sized corn tortillas (which are widely available in stores) because they're so versatile. Deep yellow corn tortillas are our favorite, but white can be good too, depending on your preference. You can use corn tortillas for making chips, enchiladas, chilaquiles, and tostadas, to name a few dishes, and they keep a long time in their sealed package in the fridge. (In Chapter 4 of Book I, you can find out how to make your own corn tortillas at home.)

Flour tortillas, with or without lard, are also available in various sizes and packs in the supermarket. You may want to stock these tortillas if you like making burritos and quesadillas. Also, search for uncooked tortilla dough in the supermarket freezer next to the cookie dough. (Chapter 4 of Book I tells you how to make flour tortillas.)

Masa harina

Masa harina is flour made from corn dough that has been dried and then ground into a powder. Quaker Oats sells it in the supermarket baking section. Ordinary yellow cornmeal for making cornbread isn't a good substitute.

Dairy Products

You can find authentic Mexican cheeses in most supermarkets. With the three basic cooking cheeses — panela, añejo, and manchego — or their substitutes, you have all the cheeses you ever need to cook authentic quesadillas or queso fundido, or to just add a bite of richness to salads, soups, and enchiladas. Remember, as a general culinary principle, just say no to orange cheese.

Añejo

Also known as Cotija (koh-tee-jah), for the town where it was first made, añejo (ah-nyeh-hoh) is a dry, aged cow's milk cheese prized for its salty bite. Because añejo isn't a good melter, you should combine it with other cheeses in cooked dishes. For sprinkling over beans, soups, and salads, it's perfect alone. Use it as you would grated Parmesan in your Italian cooking. Either Parmesan or Romano makes a good substitute.

Panela

Panela, a semi-soft, white cow's milk cheese, has a delightfully fresh milky flavor. In the freshest panela, the curds are still visible, as well as the circular pattern imprinted from the basket in which the curds were set to drain. We like it diced, as a garnish for soup or posole, and in cubes in a salad because it holds its shape so well.

Contrary to its mozzarella-like appearance, panela isn't a good melter and always needs to be teamed with a Jack-like cheese for quesadillas. We recommend dry curd farmer's cheese, dry cottage, or dry ricotta as substitutes.

Mexican manchego

Don't confuse this inexpensive semi-soft cheese with Spanish manchego, a stronger aged eating cheese. Soft, mild Mexican manchego is the melter in the group. You can substitute Monterey Jack cheese for manchego.

Crema

Mexican crema, sold in jars in your supermarket's refrigerator case, is a soured milk product similar to buttermilk and sour cream. This salty, white drizzling cream is thinner and less sour than sour cream and used most often as a garnish or dressing.

We're not big fans of commercially produced crema because of the additives. The best substitute is crème fraîche, but sour cream thinned with a bit of lime juice or buttermilk to the consistency of a creamy salad dressing works in a pinch. Chapter 6 of Book I contains a recipe so that you can make your own crema at home.

Our cheese mix



We like to use a grated mixture of one part manchego, one part panela, and one part añejo rather than one cheese in our cooked dishes. The mix results in a more complex texture and flavor. Manchego lends its texture, añejo its salt, and panela its milkiness.

Of course, if you can't get your hands on all three, feel free to improvise with substitutes or use two rather than three types of cheese. The basic idea is that a variety of cheeses is always preferable to one in any melted cheese dish.

Chapter 3

Mastering a Few Simple Techniques

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering the techniques used in Mexican cooking
 - ▶ Cooking the perfect beans
-

The techniques of the Mexican kitchen don't call for split-second timing or finicky, precise movements. Just roll up your sleeves and get ready to chop, dice, slice, and occasionally whir the blender or sizzle foods in hot oil. Mexican cooking methods, based on techniques honed by home cooks over the years, depend only on your willingness to dive in and do the work.

Toasting and Seeding Vegetables and Seeds

If, in your previous attempts at cooking, you've taken heat for burning the food, you're in luck now. Good Mexican cooking calls for lots of roasting, toasting, and charring to give the food that mysterious deep, smoky, rustic edge. This may be the only time in your cooking career where to blacken is not only okay but preferred. Here's how to roast and toast some ingredients typically found in Mexican foods.

Fresh chiles and bell peppers

You can roast fresh chiles and bell peppers directly over a gas flame or on a tray under the broiler. Keep turning until the skin is evenly charred, without burning the flesh. Transfer the charred peppers to a plastic bag, tie the top

closed, and let the peppers sit until they're cool to the touch, about 15 minutes. (To speed things up, you can place the bag in a bowl of iced water.) Remove the blackened skin by pulling it off by hand, and then dip your fingers in a bowl of water to remove any blackened bits. After they're peeled, cut away the stems, seeds, and veins with a paring knife.

Don't peel roasted peppers under running tap water or you'll wash away the tasty, precious juices.

Figure 3-1 shows how to roast, peel, seed, and julienne a chile.

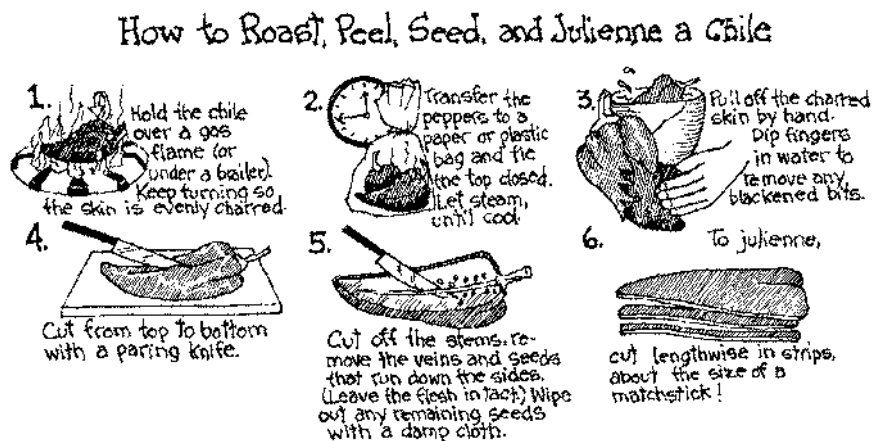


Figure 3-1:
Preparing
a chile.

Dried chiles

Dried chiles, like anchos, develop more flavor if lightly toasted. Just place them directly over a low gas flame or in a dry skillet over low flame and warm a few seconds on each side, until the flesh is bubbly and lightly toasted.

Vegetables

Tomatoes, tomatillos, onions, and garlic are often roasted on a tray under the broiler when making salsas, soups, and stews. Simply arrange all the vegetables to be roasted on a large baking sheet, protecting small garlic cloves by tucking them under larger vegetables. Stay nearby and keep turning the vegetables with tongs until everything is evenly blackened. Be careful to transfer the juices that collect on the baking sheet to the blender because they carry lots of delicious flavor.

You can also roast vegetables in a heavy, dry cast-iron skillet over a medium flame. Cook, turning frequently, until blackened.

Seeds

You can toast whole coriander, cumin, and fennel seeds on the stovetop. Place the seeds in a dry skillet over medium heat and keep shaking and tossing the pan until their aroma is released, less than a minute.

Ready, Set, Puree

We're huge fans of the humble blender that you can purchase for about \$40 at your local hardware, discount, or department store. Nothing beats it for a uniform puree. If we had to live without it, our next best choices for grinding would be a hand-cranked food mill or sieve.



When using the blender to puree hot liquids for soups or stews, follow these tips:

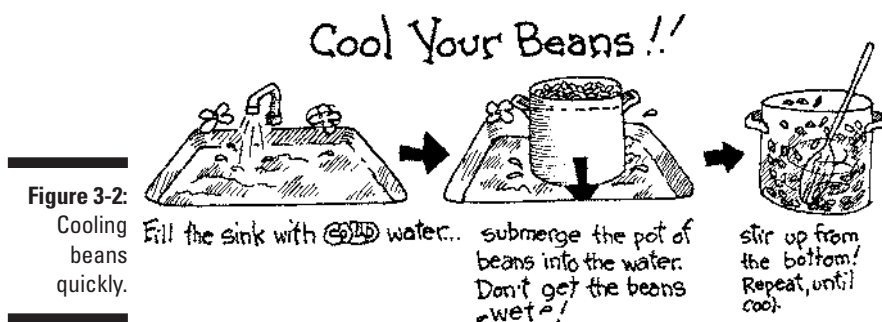
- ✓ **Never fill a blender more than halfway.** Always leave a crack open at the top for steam to escape.
- ✓ **Control the proportion of liquids to solids in the container by lifting solids from the pot with a spoon and then pouring a small amount of liquid from the pot to the blender.** A combination of about half liquid and half solids is good.
- ✓ **Always cover the top of the blender with a towel to protect yourself from escaping liquids.** You don't want more of a mess to clean up, do you?
- ✓ **Begin the action by briefly pulsing a few times to start liquefying.** When the blades are moving freely, you can let it rip.

To puree garlic in quantity, first break the bulbs apart. Peel them by first flattening the cloves with the flat side of a heavy knife or cleaver and then removing the skin. Puree with a small amount of olive oil in a blender or food processor fitted with a metal blade. Store in the refrigerator for as long as a week. You can always use pureed garlic in place of minced garlic. One table-spoon pureed equals about three cloves, minced.

Cooking Perfect Beans

Here are some suggestions to help assure perfectly cooked beans every time:

- ✓ **Never salt the water.** Salt toughens the beans' skins. Add salt to flavor after the beans are done.
- ✓ **For maximum creaminess, always cook over low heat, with the cover on, to prevent drying.** You don't want to serve dried-up, tasteless beans, do you?
- ✓ **To prevent scorching, stir with a wooden spoon several times during cooking, always reaching down to the bottom of the pot.** Burnt beans on the bottom of the pot infuse the whole pot with their unlovely aroma.
- ✓ **To test for doneness, taste a few of the smallest beans because they take the longest to cook through.** If their centers are smooth and creamy, the batch is done.
- ✓ **Use cool water in your sink to cool beans in a hurry, as shown in Figure 3-2.**
- ✓ **Use a pressure cooker for cooking beans.** Just follow the machine's instructions.

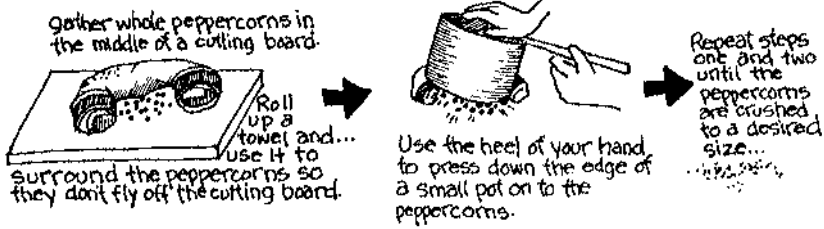


Popping Peppercorns

To crack peppercorns, place the whole peppercorn in the middle of a cutting board. To keep the peppercorns from flying away when you crack them, roll up a towel and use it to surround the corns. Place the heel of a skillet or saucepan on top and push down and away from you several times (see Figure 3-3).

How to Crush Peppercorns

Figure 3-3:
Cracking
peppercorns
down to
size.



Chapter 4

Starters, Snacks, and Sides

In This Chapter

- ▶ Stirring up salsas and dips
- ▶ Creating great-tasting flour tortillas
- ▶ Making a well-balanced quesadilla
- ▶ Tantalizing your guests with tacos
- ▶ Assembling the real enchilada
- ▶ Tempting your taste buds with tortas, empanadas, and tamales
- ▶ Stuffing chiles with success
- ▶ Making soups and salads, Mexican style
- ▶ Frying rice
- ▶ Enjoying beans for all seasons
- ▶ Varying the menu with veggie sides

We love to get a party rolling by serving large bowls of Mexican finger foods. When everyone crowds around and starts reaching into the same bowl, inevitably conversations start flowing. All the finger foods in this chapter are terrific for a party or a buffet. They're easy to prepare and interesting to eat, and most fit well on a chip. So encourage your guests to dig in, dip their chips, and accompany their drinks with any of these enticing salsas and dips.

Recipes in This Chapter

- ▶ Fresh Salsa
- ▶ Green Tomatillo Salsa
- ▶ Red Roasted Tomato Salsa
- ▶ Roasted Green Chile Salsa
- ▶ Guacamole
- ▶ Queso Fundido
- ▶ Flour Tortillas
- ▶ Grilled Vegetable Quesadillas
- ▶ Corn Tortillas
- ▶ Grilled Steak Tacos
- ▶ Fish Tacos
- ▶ Green Enchiladas with Pork
- ▶ Bolillos
- ▶ Chicken Black Bean Torta
- ▶ Empanadas de Picadillo
- ▶ Basic Masa Tamales with Fillings
- ▶ Gazpacho
- ▶ Corn and Chile Chowder
- ▶ Tortilla Soup
- ▶ Chicken Tostada Salad
- ▶ Fiesta Bean Salad
- ▶ Red Rice
- ▶ Refried Black Beans
- ▶ Poblano Mashed Potatoes
- ▶ Spicy Grilled Corn



In this chapter, you also find great recipes for quick snacks — to satisfy those Mexican-food cravings that just can't wait. We fill you in on how to make some more time-consuming Mexican treats as well — for when you have some time to spend. And we get your Mexican meal off to a great start with soups, salads, and side dishes.

Salsas and Dips

Salsas are the heart and soul of the Mexican kitchen. We use them in hundreds of recipes, from soups and stews to casseroles.

With a handful of simple ingredients and no tricky techniques or precise timing, Mexican cooks can toss together sauces as diverse as chunky fresh tomato and onion salsa; smooth, tart green tomatillo sauce; and mysteriously complex dried chile salsa in minutes. In fact, the speed with which delicious salsas are thrown together was the first thing that fascinated us about Mexican cooking.

Since Americans have discovered salsa, making it second only to ketchup in the condiment sweepstakes, hundreds of salsa recipes have been created, featuring everything from strawberries to sun-dried tomatoes. But don't be fooled! The basic Mexican salsas — perfect as chip dips, marinades for grilled foods, bases for stews and soups, and toppings for just about anything — are still the best.

Keep a stock of salsas in your refrigerator for maximum flexibility with your recipes. If you're counting calories, remember that salsas are exceptionally lowfat sauces to use in all your cooking.

The smooth, rich dips are the opposite end of the spectrum from sprightly salsas. They soothe the nerves and balance the typical fiery flavors of the Mexican kitchen.

All the dips in this section can be scooped up with tortilla chips for a tasty treat, and many of the dips can accompany a wide variety of dishes.

Fresh Salsa

This uncooked table sauce, also known as pico de gallo, salsa cruda, or plain old tomato salsa, is probably Mexico's best-known salsa. With its chunks of tomato, chiles, and onion, it's the model for most bottled salsas; but let's face it, how fresh can a sauce from a bottle be?

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Yield: 2 cups

4 medium-size ripe tomatoes, cored, seeded,
and finely diced

¼ red onion, minced (¼ cup)

2 jalapeño chiles, stemmed, seeded, and
minced

1 bunch cilantro, leaves only, chopped
(about ½ cup)

2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice

¾ teaspoon salt

Pinch of pepper

Combine all the ingredients in a mixing bowl. Stir, toss well, and serve. Store in a covered container in the refrigerator for up to 1 day.

Tip: Freshness makes all the difference in this salsa. Use only the freshest ingredients, and don't make the salsa in advance. After a day, the fresh flavors fade, and the salsa becomes mushy. Avoid the temptation to reach for the food processor to do all this chopping. You want uneven, chunky bits here, not a pureed mush.



Green Tomatillo Salsa

We love the acid bite of raw tomatillos in this quick, uncooked sauce. Use it to counter rich, creamy dishes like tamales, or with any simply grilled fish. (See Chapter 2 of Book I for information about tomatillos, the green fruit that resembles a tomato.)

Special tool: *Blender or food processor*

Preparation time: *10 minutes*

Yield: *2 cups*

¾ pound tomatillos, stemmed, husked, the stem scar cut out, and cut into quarters

3 serrano chiles, stemmed, seeded, and coarsely chopped

½ cup cold water

1 bunch scallions, white and light green parts, coarsely chopped (about 1 cup)

1 large bunch cilantro leaves and tender stems, roughly chopped (about ½ cup)

1½ teaspoons salt

Place the tomatillos, chiles, and water in a blender or food processor. Puree just until chunky. Add the scallions, cilantro, and salt and puree about 2 minutes longer, or until no large chunks remain. Store in the refrigerator, in a covered container, for up to about 3 days.

Vary It! *For a mellower version of tomatillo salsa, try roasting the tomatillos, chiles, and scallions under the broiler until blackened, about 5 minutes. Then place the roasted items in a blender or food processor with the remaining ingredients and puree.*



Red Roasted Tomato Salsa

Roasting the tomatoes until blackened gives this smooth red sauce its distinctive Mexican flavor.

Special tool: *Blender or food processor*

Preparation time: *10 minutes*

Cooking time: *25 minutes*

Yield: *1 quart*

1 pound Roma tomatoes, cored

2 tablespoons olive oil

6 garlic cloves, peeled

1 cup tomato juice

2 serrano chiles, stemmed and seeded

1 teaspoon salt

1 medium onion, cut into ½-inch slices

Pepper to taste

- 1 Preheat the broiler.
- 2 Place the tomatoes, garlic, chiles, and onion on a foil-lined baking tray. Drizzle with the olive oil. Broil 6 to 8 inches from the flame for about 12 minutes, turning frequently with tongs, until evenly charred.
- 3 Transfer the vegetables and any accumulated juices to the blender or food processor. Add the tomato juice, salt, and pepper. Puree, in batches if necessary, until smooth.
- 4 Pour into a medium saucepan. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook, uncovered, for about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Cool to room temperature for table salsa, or use warm as an ingredient in rice or chilaquiles. Store in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 days, or in the freezer for 2 weeks.

Vary It! *For the lazy cook's version of this salsa, you can use canned Roma tomatoes and totally skip the broiling part. The salsa still tastes delicious, though definitely not roasted.*



Roasted Green Chile Salsa

A chile-intensive sauce, such as this one, is a terrific complement to any red meat — grilled steaks, lamb chops, or burgers are great. If all three types of chiles aren't available, improvise according to your taste. (See Chapter 2 of Book I for details on choosing chiles.)

Special tools: Food processor

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Cooking time: 10 minutes

Yield: 3 cups

2 slices red onion, sliced 1/2-inch thin

4 garlic cloves

1 pound medium tomatillos

4 serrano chiles, halved and seeded

12 jalapeño chiles, halved and seeded

3 poblano chiles, halved and seeded

2 tablespoons olive oil

Juice of 2 limes

2 teaspoons dried oregano

1/2 teaspoons coarse salt

- 1 Preheat the broiler.
- 2 Arrange the onion, garlic, tomatillos, and chiles on a baking sheet. Drizzle evenly with the olive oil. Broil 6 to 8 inches from the flame, turning frequently with tongs, until evenly charred, about 12 minutes.
- 3 Transfer to a food processor and pulse until finely chopped. Add the lime juice, oregano, and salt and process until smooth. Serve at room temperature or chilled. Store in the refrigerator for up to 4 days.



Salsas from a bottle

Our hands-down favorites of the prepared salsas we tasted are from restaurant chef Rick Bayless of Chicago. His salsas have a good homemade quality, with charred bits left in for smokiness and no additives or weird ingredients. Two of our favorites are Frontera Chipotle Salsa and Frontera Tomatillo Salsa.

Most of the commercial tomato salsas are too chunky for our tastes. We recommend pureeing

them in the blender before using them in cooking. After giving several a critical tasting, here are our recommendations:

- ✓ Jardine's Cilantro Texasalsa
- ✓ Tostitos Restaurant Style
- ✓ Pace Hot
- ✓ Newman's Own

Guacamole

This mashed avocado dip is great for cooling down hot foods or just adding richness to anything it touches. Guacamole is terrific spread on turkey or pork sandwiches, as well as spooned over tacos, burritos, and tostadas.

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Yield: 2 cups

3 ripe avocados, preferably Hass (see Chapter 2 of Book 1)

½ bunch fresh cilantro leaves, chopped (about ¼ cup)

½ medium red onion, diced

3 jalapeño chiles, stemmed, seeded, and finely diced

3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice

1½ teaspoons salt

½ teaspoon pepper

Cut the avocados into quarters. Remove the seeds, peel, and place in a mixing bowl. Mash with a potato masher or fork until chunky. Add the cilantro, onion, chiles, lime juice, salt, and pepper and combine with a fork. Store in the refrigerator up to 1 day.



Even though guacamole is such a simple dish, people often prepare it incorrectly. Here are some secrets to making great guacamole. Follow these tips, and you can create guacamole that people can't wait to dip with a chip:

- ✓ **Do not overmash your avocados.** The proper texture is slightly chunky, not liquefied into a paste or filled with air.
- ✓ **Absolutely no tomatoes are permitted in the land of the perfect guacamole.** They add too much liquid.
- ✓ **Nix on the garlic as well.** We don't care what other cookbooks may advise. This luscious green dip is meant to be garlic-free.

Queso Fundido

Queso Fundido (*keh-soh fuhn-dee-thoh*), which means “melted cheese,” is a traditional dish from northern Mexico. The gooey richness of the melted cheese in this dip is irresistible. We add interest to this recipe by combining three cheeses: Mexican manchego for texture, añejo for salt, and panela for milkiness.

Special tool: Six 4-ounce ceramic or glass ovenproof dishes or one 1½-quart casserole

Preparation time: 15 minutes, plus 10 minutes to make the Green Tomatillo Salsa

Cooking time: 25 minutes

Yield: 6 servings as an appetizer

1½ cups (6 ounces) grated Mexican manchego or Monterey Jack cheese

½ cup (2 ounces) grated añejo cheese

½ cup (2 ounces) grated panela cheese

2 poblano chiles, roasted, peeled, seeded, and julienned (see Chapter 3 of Book I)

½ small red onion, diced (⅓ cup)

Pepper to taste

12 flour or corn tortillas, warmed

Green Tomatillo Salsa for garnish (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)

- 1 Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
- 2 Set six 4-ounce ceramic or glass ovenproof dishes, or one 1½-quart casserole, in the oven for 10 minutes to warm.
- 3 Mix the manchego, añejo, and panela cheeses in a bowl. Divide the cheese evenly among the warm dishes. Bake for 5 minutes. Arrange the chiles and onion over the warm cheese and return to the oven, until the cheese is completely melted and bubbly, about 6 minutes. Season with pepper and serve immediately with warmed tortillas for dipping and Green Tomatillo Salsa according to taste.

Vary It! For a crunchy dollop of protein, add 6 ounces of thinly sliced uncooked Spanish chorizo sausage along with the chiles and onion to the melted cheese. Or, if your grill is heated up, you can melt the cheese in aluminum foil packets on the covered grill for an authentic smoky flavor.



These chips are made for dipping

You should notice a world of difference between a warm, recently fried corn tortilla chip and one that comes from a bag. But sometimes chefs have to be realists. If you're going to buy chips for dipping or including in other dishes, look for corn chips without any added flavor or too much salt to overpower other flavors.

Here are the brands we recommend, as a result of a blind taste test:

- ✔ Santitas are a thin, white or yellow corn chip with just the right balance of salt and corn, and no other flavors to distract.
- ✔ Tostitos are a thicker, exceptionally crunchy white corn chip.
- ✔ Garden of Eatin' is an organic corn chip with a deep-yellow color and strong corn flavor. The perfectly round shape feels too machine-made for our tastes, but the flavor is tops of those we tasted.
- ✔ Padrino, Restaurant Style, a regional California brand, packs lots of corn flavor into a not-too-salty chip.

Quick Snacks

The foods in this section are sold and eaten at the local markets or informal stands scattered all over Mexico. People usually eat them as small snacks, sometimes even for breakfast, while they're out conducting their business. But in our homes, they fit in perfectly with the way we try to eat and feed our families. They make excellent use of leftovers, offer well-balanced servings of small portions of meat combined with vegetables and grains, and taste terrific.

As an added benefit, tacos and tortas make excellent, informal party foods. You can arrange all the fixings on a buffet table, along with chips and salsas, cold drinks, and maybe something easy for dessert, like cookies, so that everyone can just dig in, relax, and have fun.

Getting stuffed on quesadillas

Quesadillas (keh-sah-dee-yahz) are the Mexican answer to the grilled cheese sandwich or pizza. They're a versatile dish of flour tortillas, usually stuffed with cheeses and one or two other ingredients, cooked quickly enough to just melt the cheese and marry all the flavors. What makes a quesadilla rise to greatness, however, is the quality of those few simple ingredients and the care taken in cooking them.

Paying attention to your ingredients

Quesadillas contain very few ingredients; however, they can literally fall apart on you if the ingredients aren't brought together in the right proportions and handled properly. Here are some pitfalls to avoid when creating your own melted cheese creations:

- ✓ **Too much cheese:** Strive for a balance between tortilla and cheese so that one ingredient doesn't overwhelm the other. A quesadilla should taste of more than cheese.
- ✓ **Raw vegetables:** Each component of the quesadilla should be seasoned and cooked before being added. If you want to add a vegetable (or meat), remember that after a quesadilla is tossed into the oven or pan, you're cooking it quickly, just long enough to melt the cheese. Uncooked ingredients in the center will remain uncooked, and they won't be nearly as delicious as cooked and seasoned vegetables.

Making your own flour tortillas

In Mexico, people make tortillas by hand and eat them at almost every meal in some form or another. People in northern Mexico eat flour tortillas, while those in the south favor corn tortillas. The taste of a good homemade flour tortilla adds an extra dimension to any dish; however, if you're pressed for time, you can substitute good store-bought tortillas.

Flour Tortillas

Ever wonder what to do on one of those afternoons when it seems like there's nothing going on? Why not gather the kids together and roll out a batch of unbelievably delicious homemade tortillas? They're easier to make than bread (see Figure 4-1), and the rewards are immediate. Children love them slathered with butter and honey for breakfast.

Preparation time: 25 minutes, plus 15 minutes resting time for dough

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: Twelve 8-inch tortillas

3½ cups flour plus extra for dusting

1½ teaspoons salt

½ cup plus 1 tablespoon vegetable shortening

1 cup plus 2 tablespoons lukewarm water

- 1** Place the flour, shortening, and salt in a bowl and lightly rub the ingredients together with your fingers until evenly mixed. Pour in the warm water and stir with a wooden spoon. Then gather the dough together and knead a few times by hand until a smooth dough is formed.
- 2** Divide the dough into 12 equal-sized pieces. Roll each piece into a ball and place on a baking tray or cutting board. Cover with a tea towel and let rest at room temperature for at least 15 minutes, or up to 1 hour.

- 3 Cut out twelve 10-inch squares of waxed or parchment paper for stacking the tortillas. On a lightly floured board, roll each ball into an 8-inch circle and transfer to a paper square. Stack the tortillas on a baking tray or platter and refrigerate until cooking time. You can keep uncooked tortillas in the refrigerator for up to 2 days if they're well wrapped with paper squares between the layers.
- 4 To cook, heat a dry griddle or 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat. Carefully peel the paper from the tortillas and cook them, one at a time, until they're puffy and slightly brown, about 40 seconds per side. Set aside to cool slightly on a paper towel-lined platter. Bring them to the table wrapped in a towel for warmth, or wrap well and store in the refrigerator for a few days or in the freezer for up to a month.

Vary It! You can crisp flour tortillas in the oven for a delicious, nutritious treat. Brush the tortillas with melted butter, sprinkle with a mixture of cinnamon and sugar, and arrange them in a single layer on an uncoated baking sheet. Bake in a 350-degree oven until crisp, about 10 minutes. For a savory version, brush with olive oil, sprinkle with savory seeds and spices like cumin, sesame, and chiles, and bake until crisp, about 10 minutes.



Cooking up quesadillas

In the following recipes, we have you put the quesadillas in the oven for the final bring-it-all-together stage. However, you can cook a quesadilla in more than one way, especially if you're cooking at home for just one or two people. You can prepare quesadillas quickly on the stovetop, using our quick and easy method: Heat the tortilla on both sides in a lightly oiled or buttered skillet over low heat. Then sprinkle on and lightly melt the cheese, scatter on the toppings, and fold. Cook, turning once or twice, until the cheese is completely melted.

How to Make Your Own Flour Tortillas

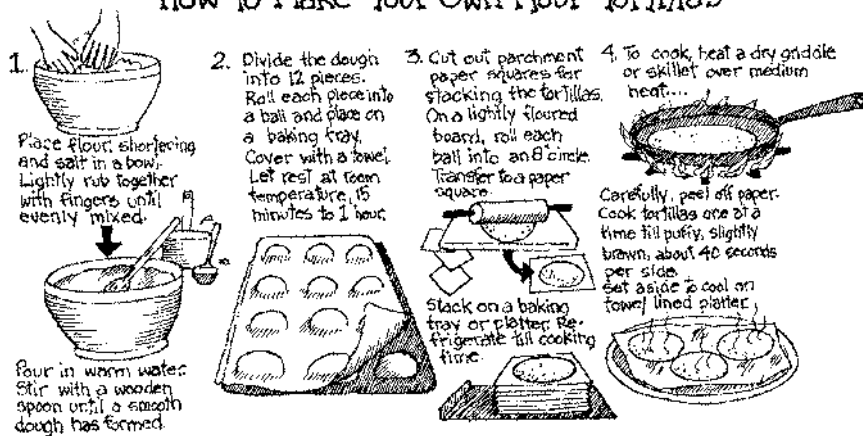


Figure 4-1:
Making flour
tortillas.

Grilled Vegetable Quesadillas

Here is a great use for leftover grilled or roasted vegetables. You need to start out with about 2½ cups of whatever veggie mix you choose to use.

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: 6 servings

¼ cup olive oil

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon pepper

2 cloves garlic, minced

½ bunch fresh oregano or marjoram leaves, coarsely chopped (¼ cup), or ½ tablespoon dried oregano or marjoram leaves

2 small zucchini, ends trimmed

2 small yellow crookneck squash, trimmed

1 large red bell pepper, stemmed and seeded

1 medium red onion

3 jalapeños, stemmed and seeded

Butter for greasing baking sheets

Six 8-inch flour tortillas

2 cups (8 ounces) grated Mexican cheeses, such as Mexican manchego, panela, and añejo

- 1 Prepare a medium fire in a grill or preheat the broiler.
- 2 In a large bowl, whisk together the olive oil, vinegar, salt, pepper, garlic, and oregano or marjoram.
- 3 Cut the zucchini, squash, red pepper, onion, and chiles into quarters lengthwise. Place them in the bowl with the olive oil mixture and mix to evenly coat. Grill or broil slowly, turning frequently, until lightly golden and soft, about 10 minutes. Cool slightly and cut all the vegetables into 2-inch pieces. Transfer to a bowl and set aside.
- 4 Adjust the oven temperature to 350 degrees. Lightly butter 2 baking sheets and arrange the tortillas in a single layer. Spread equal amounts of the grated cheese mix over each tortilla and bake for 5 minutes, until melted. Spoon equal amounts of the grilled vegetable mixture over the cheese, fold over to enclose, and return the tortillas to the oven just to heat through, about 4 minutes. Serve hot, whole or cut in wedges.

Vary It! If you're firing up the gas grill for the veggies, you can make your quesadillas on the grill as well. Turn the heat down to medium-low and place a cookie sheet, or sheet of foil, over the grate to avoid messy cheese drops.



Quesadilla riffs

Like other great melted cheese dishes, quesadillas lend themselves to improvisation. Here are a few alternative ideas for topping our standard cheese mix (see in Chapter 2 of Book I for more about our cheese mix). Regardless of what kind of cheese you use, the technique remains the same: First top the tortilla with grated cheese, melt slightly, scatter on toppings, and bake until melted through.

- ✔ Mashed, roasted garlic and shredded, roasted, or barbecued pork
- ✔ Sautéed whole zucchini blossoms, seasoned with salt and pepper
- ✔ Sautéed, sliced mushrooms (the wilder the better), with garlic and herbs
- ✔ Fresh Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter) over cheese
- ✔ Sautéed small shrimp and Green Tomatillo Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)
- ✔ Sautéed corn kernels, avocado slices, and Fresh Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)
- ✔ Crumbled blue cheese or cream cheese (instead of the cheese mix) with guava jelly or plum jelly

Transforming tortillas into tacos

Ever since we started hanging out at Los Angeles's taco stands in search of authentic snack foods, we've been taken with the taco's ability to satisfy like very few fast foods.

The foundation of a taco is two warmed, soft corn tortillas, stacked. These tortillas are topped with a savory filling like meat or fish and then sprinkled with spicy, crunchy garnishes and salsas to taste. The resulting package is tender and juicy. Our mouths water at the thought of those little bits of grilled or stewed meats; chunks of crunchy onion, cabbage, or lettuce; and soothing avocado, all doused with spicy salsa and sloppily tucked into fragrant, soft, corn tortillas. Yum! Sure beats a hot dog on a stick and those crisp tacos sold at fast-food joints.

If you don't have all the suggested toppings in the house, don't let that come between you and a good taco. After all, tacos were created to make good use of leftovers. Almost anything that you can wrap in a tortilla and bring to your mouth qualifies as a taco. Chopped fresh onion, cilantro leaves, lime wedges, sour cream, and bottled salsa make great authentic toppings for most fillings. And tacos are terrific interactive party foods. Just place some grilled, sliced meats out on a buffet table with an assortment of salsas and toppings and watch your guests improvise.

Making your own corn tortillas

Handmade corn tortillas have a pebbly texture and a definitive, earthy corn flavor. They're a wonderful addition to a Mexican-themed party, where their heavenly aroma is sure to draw guests into the kitchen to start the nibbling. In the Mexican home, fresh tortillas are bought daily, as the French buy baguettes.

Corn Tortillas

The Quaker Oats brand of masa harina or the Aztec Milling Company's deep yellow masa harina works well in this recipe. (See Chapter 2 of Book I for more about masa harina.)

Special tool: *Tortilla press*

Preparation time: *15 minutes*

Cooking time: *20 minutes*

Yield: *Twelve to eighteen 6-inch tortillas*

2 cups masa harina

1 to 1½ cups lukewarm water

Pinch of salt

- 1** Combine the masa harina and salt in a large mixing bowl and add the lukewarm water while stirring, until smooth. The dough should be slightly sticky and form a ball when pressed together. To test, flatten a small ball of dough between your palms or 2 sheets of plastic wrap. If the edges crack, add more water a little at a time until a test piece doesn't crack.
- 2** Divide the dough into 12 to 18 pieces, depending upon the size you prefer for your tortillas. Roll each piece into a ball and place the ball on a plate covered with a damp cloth towel.
- 3** Heat a dry cast-iron or nonstick frying pan or a stovetop griddle over medium heat. Flatten each ball of dough between 2 sheets of heavy plastic wrap either in a tortilla press (see Figure 4-2) or on a counter by using your hands or with a rolling pin. Remove the plastic from the top and, holding the tortilla with your fingertips, peel off the bottom sheet of plastic. Lay the tortillas, one by one, on the griddle and cook for about 1 minute and 15 seconds per side, gently pressing the top of the second side with your fingertips to encourage the tortilla to puff. Use tongs or a spatula to turn.
- 4** Cool the hot tortillas in a single layer on a towel. When they are still warm, but not hot, stack and wrap in the towel. Serve immediately or let cool, wrap well in plastic, and store in the refrigerator up to 1 week. Corn tortillas can be frozen for 2 weeks.





Reheating tortillas

To reheat refrigerated corn or flour tortillas, just follow these steps:

1. Heat the oven to 200 degrees.
2. Warm a tea towel by placing it on a baking sheet and putting it in the oven briefly.
3. Place a dry skillet over medium heat. Warm the tortillas in the skillet, one at a time, about 30 seconds per side, and stack them,

covering them with the warm towel between additions.

If the tortillas are dry, sprinkle them with water before reheating.

4. Wrap stacked tortillas in the towel, wrap the towel with foil, and place in the oven until ready to serve.

Using a Tortilla Press

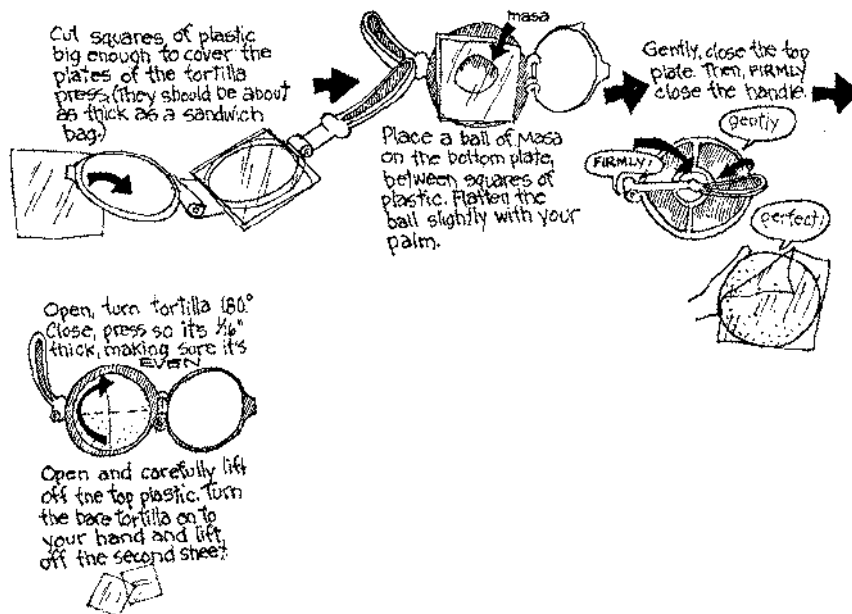


Figure 4-2:
Shaping a
tortilla by
using a
tortilla
press.

Building a taco

A good taco is a well-balanced meal in a package. It can be as simple or as complex as you like, but here are some blueprints:

- 1 Warm the tortillas by quickly dipping each in a shallow pan of water and placing them on a grill or hot dry sauté pan for 30 seconds on each side to soften.**

Stack and wrap in a damp tea towel and then in aluminum foil. Set the tortillas aside in a warm place for up to 30 minutes.

- 2. Stack two warm, soft corn tortillas together.**
- 3. Top with warm, well-seasoned meat, either chopped or shredded.**
- 4. Add some spicy salsa.**
- 5. Sprinkle with a variety of garnishes.**

For crunch, add chopped onion, shredded cabbage, sliced radish, or Fresh Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter). For creaminess, add Crema (see Chapter 6 of Book I), Guacamole (earlier in this chapter), chopped avocado, sour cream, or shredded cheese.

- 6. Fold to enclose and carry to your mouth quickly for instant ingestion.**

Making tasty tacos

The best tacos probably don't start with a recipe at all. They spring from surprising sources — like the leftovers in the back of your refrigerator. Here are some likely inspirations:

- ✓ Holiday turkey
- ✓ Roasted chicken or last night's Mexican take-out chicken
- ✓ Leg of lamb
- ✓ Steak
- ✓ Pork, roasted or barbecued
- ✓ Brisket
- ✓ Fish fillets
- ✓ Cold, poached shrimp, lobster, or crabmeat

The following recipes aren't quite as adventurous as the previous suggestions, but they give you a great place to start experiencing the taco.

Grilled Steak Tacos

Mexican street vendors, pushing charcoal-burning pushcarts, sell fabulous *tacos al carbon*, or grilled tacos.

Preparation time: 10 minutes, plus 15 minutes for Fresh Salsa

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

1 pound, skirt or tri-tip steak, trimmed of fat and silverskin

Salt and pepper to taste

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 tablespoon olive oil

Juice of ½ lime (1 tablespoon)

Twelve 4½-inch or eight 6-inch corn tortillas

1 bunch coarsely chopped cilantro leaves (about ½ cup)

2 peeled, seeded, and sliced avocados

1 bunch diagonally sliced scallions

Garnishes: Lime wedges, ¼ head shredded white cabbage or lettuce, Fresh Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)

- 1 Prepare a hot fire in a gas or charcoal grill.
- 2 Half an hour before grilling, season the steak evenly with salt and pepper. Rub with the garlic and oregano and evenly drizzle with the olive oil and lime juice. Turn to evenly coat steak and refrigerate.
- 3 Grill the steak over high heat for 1½ minutes per side, or until it's caramelized on the outside and pink in the center. Let sit for 5 minutes before slicing into ¼-inch strips across the grain (at a right angle to the way the meat's fibers are running). Serve immediately with warmed tortillas, garnishes, and plenty of Fresh Salsa.

Vary It! For grilled chicken tacos, season the meat with plenty of salt and pepper or marinate in your favorite marinade. Grill about 1¼ pounds of chicken thighs or breasts, on the bone, for 30 minutes over medium heat, turning frequently. Remove the meat from the bones, cut into ¼-inch strips, and use as a filling with the same garnishes suggested in the Grilled Steak Tacos recipe.



Fish Tacos

We like our fish tacos soft, juicy, and overflowing with luscious chunks of fish and bits of vegetables. If you don't have time to make the special Cucumber Salsa that we suggest to go along with these tacos, you can just add chopped cucumbers, chiles, and tomatoes, along with a squirt of lemon or lime juice and some olive oil.

Preparation time: 10 minutes, plus 50 minutes for the Cucumber Salsa

Yield: 3 servings

1½ pounds salmon, snapper, bass, or halibut fillet

Extra-virgin olive oil for drizzling

Salt and pepper to taste

Twelve 6-inch corn tortillas, warmed

6 lettuce leaves

Cucumber Salsa (see the following recipe)

Lime wedges for squeezing

Garnishes: Avocado, radish slices

- 1 Prepare a medium-hot fire in a charcoal or gas grill.
- 2 Drizzle the fish with olive oil, season with salt and pepper, and grill until barely done, for 2 to 5 minutes per side, depending on the thickness. Remove the fish from the grill, let cool slightly, and then pull apart into large flakes.
- 3 Place the tortillas on a work surface. Line each with a piece of lettuce and top with chunks of fish. Top each with a generous spoonful of Cucumber Salsa, a squirt of lime, and a drizzle of olive oil. Garnish with avocado and radishes and serve.

Cucumber Salsa

Preparation time: 20 minutes, plus 30 minutes marination

Yield: 3 cups

4 pickling cucumbers, diced

½ small red onion, diced

½ bunch cilantro, chopped (½ cup)

1 small tomato, seeded and diced

3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice

3 tablespoons freshly squeezed orange juice

2 teaspoons salt

½ teaspoon pepper

2 serrano chiles, stemmed and sliced in thin rounds

Place all the ingredients in a bowl, combine well, and let stand, covered, for at least 30 minutes. Store in the refrigerator for up to 48 hours.

Vary It! You don't have to start this recipe with uncooked fish. Tacos are a terrific way to use leftover fish. Just warm the fish first and then pull the flesh apart into large flakes.



Entertaining with enchiladas

Authentic enchiladas aren't at all like the heavy, goopy concoctions, overburdened with cheese and swimming in sauce, found on most combination plates in Mexican restaurants in the United States. In Mexico, enchiladas are a dish of day-old tortillas, lightly coated with sauce, filled with small bits of meat or vegetables, rolled up, and then baked to meld the flavors. At home, they make a terrific inexpensive, healthy, small meal to serve at informal gatherings.

The rolling involved in assembling enchiladas can sometimes frustrate beginning cooks. For perfectly rolled enchiladas every time, make sure that your tortillas are properly soaked and soft (see the following recipe for the details on what to soak them in) and then follow these steps (see Figure 4-3):

1. Place 1 tortilla flat on your work surface. Place the enchilada filling in the center of each tortilla, spreading it evenly from edge to edge.
2. Fold one-third of the tortilla over the center.
3. Fold the other one-third of the tortilla over to enclose the filling.
4. Place the enchilada in a casserole dish with the seam side down.

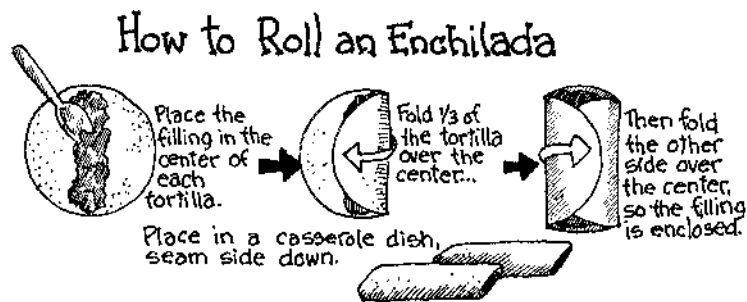


Figure 4-3:
Rolling an
enchilada.

Enchiladas are great for weeknight entertaining. Just assemble the casserole in the morning and store it in the refrigerator. When you get home at night, pop the enchiladas in the oven to heat through and serve. Tortillas, by the way, last in the refrigerator for as long as a week.

Green Enchiladas with Pork

Rich pork and tangy light green salsa are a natural combination in the Mexican kitchen. Add the earthiness of toasted corn from the tortillas, and you've got a winning dish.

Preparation time: 5 minutes, plus 15 minutes for Green Tomatillo Salsa

Cooking time: 1 hour and 30 minutes

Yield: 6 servings as an appetizer, 4 as an entrée

1¼ pounds boneless stewing pork butt or shoulder, cut into 2-inch chunks

Salt and pepper to taste

3 cups Green Tomatillo Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)

1 cup vegetable oil

Twelve 6-inch corn tortillas

4 ounces panela cheese, crumbled

½ red onion, cut into rings

- 1 Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
- 2 Season the pork all over with salt and pepper and place in a small ovenproof casserole dish. Pour on 1 cup of the Green Tomatillo Salsa. Cover with foil and bake for 1 hour, until tender. Let the pork cool and then shred it, reserving it in the sauce.
- 3 Pour the vegetable oil into a large skillet and place over medium heat. One at a time, dip the tortillas in the hot oil, and fry for about 10 seconds on each side. Drain on a rack.
- 4 Pour the remaining 2 cups of salsa into a shallow bowl or pie dish. Dip each tortilla into the salsa to lightly coat and place them on your work surface. (Reserve the remaining salsa for the next step.)
- 5 Divide the meat into 12 servings, and spoon into the center of each tortilla. Roll to enclose the meat in the tortilla.
- 6 Arrange the enchiladas in a single layer in a medium casserole dish, seam side down, and pour the remaining salsa over the top, discarding the fatty juices in the bowl. Bake for 15 minutes, until heated through. Sprinkle with the cheese and onions and serve.



Snacking on tortas

In addition to fabulous tacos for snacking anywhere, Mexican cooks also make delectable sandwiches called *tortas*. These small, overstuffed sandwiches, served on hollowed-out crusty rolls called *bolillos* (boh-lee-yohs), are generally found at small stands specializing in tortas.

We first tasted a torta after waiting in line outside a small shack in Mexico City. Sampling one of these well-packed, warm little bundles, served with its requisite selection of pickled vegetables, was well worth the wait.

Bolillos

Bolillos are a plain, crisp, white roll that you can use to make sandwiches or to eat with butter and jam at breakfast. They're a delight to have in the house, but if you don't have the time, a good substitute is a small, crisp French roll or a light sourdough roll.

Always pull out the doughy filling of these rolls with your fingers before making tortas.

Preparation time: 25 minutes mixing, plus 30 minutes sitting and 1 hour and 30 minutes rising

Cooking time: 25 minutes

Yield: Twelve 6-inch rolls

2 cups lukewarm water

Two ¼-ounce packages dry yeast

1 tablespoon sugar

¼ cup vegetable shortening

7 cups flour plus flour for coating work surface

1 tablespoon salt

½ cup milk

2 tablespoons vegetable oil for coating the bowl

1 tablespoon salt dissolved in ½ cup water for brushing

- 1 Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
- 2 In a large mixing bowl or bowl of an electric mixer with a paddle, combine the water, yeast, and sugar. Stir to dissolve the yeast. Add the shortening and 2 cups of the flour and mix until smooth. Set aside at room temperature for 30 minutes.
- 3 Stir the salt into the milk and add to the flour mixture. With the machine running, gradually add the remaining 5 cups of flour until the dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl. Switch to the dough hook and knead at low speed for an additional 15 minutes. Transfer the dough to a lightly oiled bowl and turn to coat all sides of the dough. Cover with a damp towel and set aside to rise in a warm place until doubled in bulk, about 1 hour.
- 4 Punch down the dough and briefly knead on a lightly floured surface. Divide the dough into 12 portions. Roll each portion into a ball, or shape into a flat oval and pinch the ends. Place the balls on baking sheets with 2 inches between each, cover with a damp towel, and let rise, about 30 minutes, or until the dough holds a fingerprint when poked.
- 5 Brush the salt water over the rolls and bake for 20 to 30 minutes, until the crusts are golden brown. Cool and serve, or wrap well and freeze.



Chicken Black Bean Torta

A warm chicken sandwich such as this torta, served with interesting garnishes, is so much more satisfying than an ordinary cold meat sandwich.

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: 5 minutes

Yield: 4 sandwiches

2 tablespoons butter for spreading

4 Bolillos (see the recipe earlier in this chapter), cut in half lengthwise and excess dough removed from both halves

1 cup Refried Black Beans (see the recipe later in this chapter), or good-quality canned refried black beans

8 tablespoons (2 ounces) grated añejo cheese

1 chicken breast, cut into 4 thin slices crosswise and pounded to 1/8-inch thickness

Salt and pepper to taste

Olive oil for coating

1 cup Pickled Red Onions (see the following recipe)

Freshly cracked black pepper

- 1 Preheat the broiler or prepare a medium-hot fire in a charcoal or gas grill.
- 2 Lightly butter both halves of the Bolillos. Toast on the hot grill or under the broiler until golden, about 3 minutes. Spread the bottom halves with the black beans, sprinkle with cheese, and warm on a tray in the oven for about 5 minutes.
- 3 Season the chicken all over with salt and pepper. Lightly coat a skillet with the olive oil and place over high heat. Sauté the chicken for about 30 to 45 seconds per side, until cooked through. Place the chicken on the top halves of bread. Top with Pickled Red Onions and plenty of fresh cracked pepper. Close with the bean-lined halves of the bolillos and serve.

Pickled Red Onions

1 red onion, sliced into thin rings

1 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon dried oregano

1 habañero chile, seeded and sliced

1/2 cup freshly squeezed orange juice

1/4 cup freshly squeezed lime juice

Place the onion rings in a bowl and pour on enough boiling water to cover them. Let sit for 2 minutes. Drain, add the salt, oregano, chile, orange juice, and lime juice, and store in the refrigerator for 4 hours or up to 2 days.

Vary It! For a turkey torta, purchase thinly sliced, uncooked turkey breast slices and substitute for the chicken.



Stuffed Treats

The foods in this section are among the most traditional and beloved in Mexico. All the recipes take some extra time to prepare because of the many steps and the handwork involved in wrapping the foods. But just like any carefully chosen gift, they're more special because of all that work.

Empanadas: Little pies full of flavor

If you explore your local Spanish-speaking neighborhood and wander into a few small grocery stores or bakeries, you're sure to spot a fragrant stack of *empanadas* behind the counter. Sometimes they're big overstuffed half moons, and sometimes they're delicate miniature pastries, but whatever shape they take, a local cook usually made them at home.

With their irresistible savory fillings and neat handheld size, these little pastries are a popular snack food in most Latin American communities. In addition to making wonderful, interesting appetizers for a party at home, empanadas make a terrific lunch and are naturals for packing into picnic baskets and lunch boxes.

Empanadas de Picadillo

Picadillo is a dish from Spain. It contains highly seasoned, slightly sweetened, ground fried meat. In addition to making an excellent stuffing for these little turnovers, you also can use picadillo to stuff chiles for baking, to fill tacos, or to simply serve alongside rice and beans. You can make the dough recipe a few days ahead and refrigerate it.

Preparation time: 20 minutes, plus 30 minutes chilling and 1 hour to make the salsas

Cooking time: 35 minutes

Yield: 15 empanadas

1 pound lean ground beef

1 medium yellow onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped

½ cup raisins, chopped

½ cup green olives, chopped

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon pepper

2 teaspoons ground cumin

¼ teaspoon ground cloves

1 tablespoon brown sugar (optional)

½ cup Red Roasted Tomato Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter) or store-bought salsa

Empanada Dough (see the following recipe) or 1 pound frozen pie dough

1 egg combined with 2 tablespoons milk, lightly beaten for brushing on dough

Garnish: Roasted Green Chile Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)

- 1 Brown the ground beef in a large heavy skillet over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, about 7 minutes. Drain off and discard the excess fat. Add the onion and sauté for 5 minutes. Then add the garlic, raisins, olives, salt, pepper, cumin, cloves, and brown sugar, if desired. Cook until their aromas are released, about 2½ minutes. Stir in the Red Roasted Tomato Salsa, bring to a boil, and set aside to cool.
- 2 Roll out the dough and cut into circles as described in the following recipe.
- 3 Place a generous tablespoon of the beef filling in the center of each pastry round. Fold over and press the edges together to seal. Transfer to a baking sheet and chill for a half hour, or wrap and freeze. (You don't have to defrost frozen empanadas before baking.)
- 4 Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.
- 5 Brush the pastries all over with the egg wash and arrange in a single layer on a baking sheet. Bake until golden, about 15 minutes. Serve hot with the Roasted Green Chile Salsa.

Empanada Dough

Preparation time: 20 minutes, plus 1 hour chilling

2 cups flour plus additional for dusting

1 teaspoon sugar

12 tablespoons cold butter

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup water

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

- 1 Combine the flour and butter in a large bowl. Lightly blend with your fingertips until the butter is evenly distributed in chunks. Dissolve the salt and sugar in the water and stir into the flour mixture.
- 2 On a lightly floured surface, turn out the mixture and lightly knead the dough until it forms a ball, adding a bit more water if necessary. Knead by pushing the ball of dough away from you with the heel of your hand, and then gathering it up, and making a quarter turn before repeating. Wrap in plastic and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or freeze as long as a week. Return to room temperature before rolling.
- 3 Divide the dough in half. On a floured board, roll out half the dough to a thickness of $\frac{1}{8}$ inch. With a cookie cutter or a drinking glass, cut out 4-inch circles. Gather the scraps, add to the remaining dough, and reroll and cut out circles until all the dough is used.

Vary It! For cocktail-sized servings, we sometimes make empanadas into tiny bite-sized pieces. When cutting out the dough, make sure that each circle is large enough to stuff. You want each bite to contain both meat and pastry. We find a 3-inch circle is just the right size.



Tamales: Feast-day treats

Making tamales, like eating tamales, is an activity meant to be shared. In Mexico, where tamales have been a fiesta food since the Indians first offered them to the gods, groups traditionally prepare these labor-intensive stuffed and steamed packages in a sort of pre-party party. The holiday they are most closely associated with in Mexico is All Saints' Day, while in the United States, tamales are a Christmas tradition.

Wrapping a tamale

Before you can unwrap and enjoy the delicious filling of a tamale, you first need to create the tidy corn-husk packages. Just follow these steps (and have a look at Figure 4-4):

- 1. Soak the dried corn husks in hot water for 2 hours or overnight.**
- 2. Drain the corn husks on paper towels.**
- 3. Cut out 9-inch squares of aluminum foil.**

You need one for each tamale.

- 4. Spread 1 or 2 husks lengthwise on the counter with the narrow end pointing away from you.**
- 5. Spread about 2½ tablespoons of filling down the center, leaving about 2 inches bare at the top of the husk.**
- 6. Fold over the sides and then the ends to enclose the filling.**
- 7. Place the folded tamale on a square of foil and fold over the foil to enclose the package.**

Repeat with the remaining filling and additional corn husks.

Banana leaves also make excellent wrappers for tamales. To use, holding them in your hands, run the leaves directly over a stovetop gas or electric burner on low heat or place in a dry skillet for a few seconds. This process softens the leaves, makes them fragrant, and brightens the green color. Cut them into 9-inch squares, trimming out the tough center stem, and wrap the stuffed banana leaf in foil to enclose.

How to Wrap a Tamale in Corn Husks or Banana Leaves

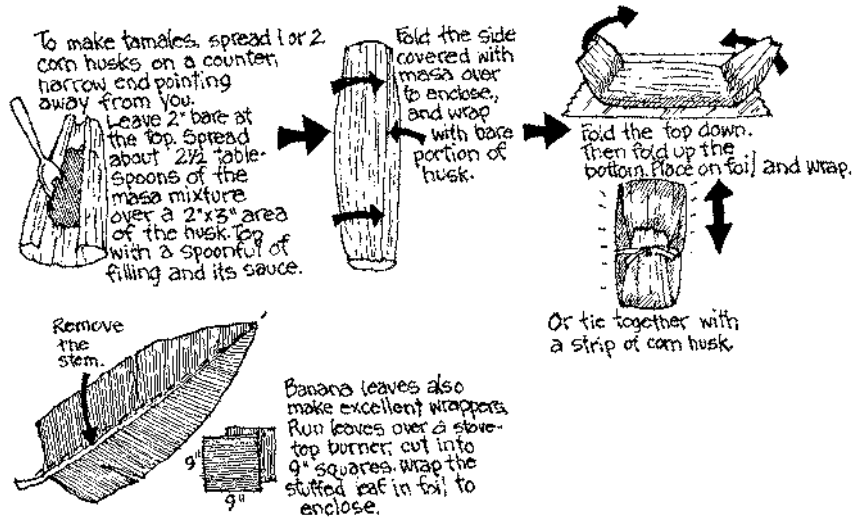


Figure 4-4:
Wrapping a
tamale.

Steaming the tamales

Small batches of tamales can fit into a vegetable steamer basket, but for larger quantities, you need a steamer, which is a large pot with a perforated portion on top for the tamales.

If you don't have a steamer, you can improvise by balancing a rack or colander on top of one or two empty cans or inverted coffee cups that are set in a large pasta or soup pot. Make sure that the water doesn't touch the rack's bottom.

Always keep an eye on the pot while the tamales are steaming so that the water doesn't get too low or entirely evaporate. And always line the steamer tray with extra husks to cushion the cooking process.

Tamales for every occasion

Mastering tamale making is really just a matter of getting organized and setting aside the time, preferably with a group of friends, to dig in and cook.

Basic Masa Tamales with Fillings

Our basic masa tamale recipe is built for flexibility. First, we explain the technique for beating the masa, filling the corn husks, and then steaming. We follow that recipe with three options for savory fillings to flavor the masa — chiles and cheese, chicken and salsa, and pork in adobado sauce. You can use the salsas or sauces that go with the fillings in three ways: $\frac{1}{2}$ cup gets beaten into the masa, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup gets mixed into the filling, and the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup is served with the finished tamales.

Tamales as delicious as these deserve to be the main focus of a meal. The traditional accompaniments are rice and beans, but we prefer to serve them with something lighter, like a big green salad.

Preparation time: 30 minutes (not including the preparation time for the filling and sauce and softening time for corn husks)

Cooking time: 1 hour and 15 minutes (not including the preparation time for the filling and sauce)

Yield: 12 to 14 tamales

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup sauce from one of the filling recipes that follow this recipe

1 cup chicken stock (later in this chapter), at room temperature

1 teaspoon baking soda

1½ teaspoons salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegetable shortening or cold lard

1 pound cold prepared ground masa for tamales, or 1¾ cups dry masa harina, moistened with 1 cup warm water and then chilled

8-ounce package dried corn husks, softened

Fillings and sauces (see the following recipes)

Garnish: Sour cream

- 1** Mix together $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the salsa or sauce from one of the fillings, the chicken stock, baking soda, and salt, and set aside.
- 2** Place the masa in the bowl of an electric mixer and beat at medium speed until light in texture, about 6 minutes. Slowly add the chicken stock mixture while beating continuously at medium-high speed. Turn the mixer speed up to high and add the shortening or lard, a tablespoon at a time, beating well after each addition. Continue beating and scraping down the bowl until the mixture is light and fluffy, about 15 minutes total. Test for lightness by dropping 1 tablespoon of masa into cold water: If it floats, the mixture is light enough. If not, continue beating at high speed a few minutes longer.
- 3** Wrap the tamales according to the instructions in “Wrapping a tamale” earlier in this chapter, spreading about 2½ tablespoons of the masa mixture over a 2- \times -3-inch area of husk. Top with a spoonful of filling and its sauce.
- 4** To cook, line a steamer with corn husks and fill with tamales, upright in layers. Cook over simmering water for 1 hour and 15 minutes, until the husks just pull away from the masa without sticking. Serve hot with the remaining sauce and sour cream. (You can reheat cold tamales in a steamer over simmering water for 30 minutes.) Store leftover tamales in the refrigerator as long as 4 days, or you can freeze them. Reheat for about 30 minutes in the steamer.

Green Chile Cheese Filling

If you like chile rellenos, you'll love this recipe.

Preparation time: 15 minutes, plus 15 minutes to make the Green Tomatillo Salsa

Yield: 12 to 14 tamales

1½ cups Green Tomatillo Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)

4 poblano chiles, roasted, peeled, seeded, and cut into ½-inch strips

1 pound Mexican cheese, such as Ranchero, queso fresco, panela, or manchego, cut into ½-inch cubes (about 3 cups)

In a large mixing bowl, combine ½ cup of the salsa, the chiles, and the cheese. (Reserve ½ cup of the salsa to incorporate into the masa.) Serve the remaining ½ cup of salsa alongside the finished tamales.

Roasted Tomato Chicken Filling

Olives and raisins add sweet and salty accents to this easy chicken filling.

Preparation time: 5 minutes, plus 35 minutes to make the Red Roasted Tomato Salsa

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: 12 to 14 tamales

1½ cups Red Roasted Tomato Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)

2 cups shredded cooked chicken

½ cup green olives, pitted

½ cup golden raisins

In a medium saucepan over medium heat, combine ½ cup of the salsa, the chicken, olives, and raisins. Simmer for about 15 minutes, until heated through. (Reserve ½ cup of the salsa to incorporate into the masa.) Serve the remaining ½ cup salsa alongside the finished tamales.

Pork and Green Chile Adobo Filling

Rich pork and spicy green chiles are a tough combination to beat.

Preparation time: 5 minutes, plus 1 hour 20 minutes to make the Adobado Sauce

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: 12 to 14 tamales

1½ cups Adobado Sauce (see Chapter 5 of Book I)

2 cups shredded, cooked pork

1 poblano chile, roasted, peeled, seeded and cut into ½-inch-wide strips

In a medium saucepan over medium heat, combine ½ cup of the Adobado Sauce, the pork, and the chile. Simmer for about 15 minutes, until heated through. (Reserve ½ cup of the sauce to incorporate into the masa.) Serve the remaining ½ cup sauce alongside the finished tamales.



Soups and Salads

Making Mexican soups is very easy. No silky smooth bisques require multiple strainings, no expensive ingredients like lobster or crab make you check your credit card balance, and no delicate techniques set your teeth on edge. With just a few simple ingredients and the push of a blender button, you can make the kind of flavorful, satisfying soups that mean pleasure in any language.

Salad doesn't play the same part in the Mexican meal plan as it does in other parts of the world. Mexican cooks use so many fresh vegetables in their garnishes and salsas that serving a bowl full of chopped lettuce and tomato as an accompaniment just doesn't make sense. Instead, they top tacos with chopped onion, cilantro, and tomato; generously garnish posoles with shredded cabbage, radishes, and avocado; and sell sliced cucumbers, roasted corn, and fresh fruit on the street as snack foods.

Setting your sights on Mexican soups

Mexican soups are a snap to prepare, once you have the right tools and a few tips under your cooking belt.

Mexican cooks make several types of brothy dishes, but the most popular are the thinner broths referred to as *sopas* (Spanish for "soups"). They run the gamut from rich creamed vegetable soups, to cold gazpacho, to the thin and familiar tortilla soup, but the unifying thread is that all are light enough to be eaten as a first course.

Sopa secas are leftover *sopas* in which the liquid has been absorbed enough for the dish to be eaten as a side dish or starter, with a fork.

Gazpacho

Gazpacho is a perfect first course for just about anything you choose to serve in the heat of the summer — except for a tomato-based entree. It's one of those simple uncooked dishes in which a quality olive oil makes a great deal of difference. So haul out that expensive extra-virgin olive oil you got as a present for your last birthday and let it pour. You won't regret it.

Preparation time: 20 minutes, plus 2 hours chilling time

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

1 slice white bread, crusts removed	2 cloves garlic, peeled
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar	½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
3 cups tomato juice, plus more if needed to thin the soup	3 jalapeños, stemmed, seeded, and chopped
6 pickling cucumbers, peeled, seeded, and diced	1 teaspoon sugar
4 scallions, thinly sliced	¾ teaspoon salt
1 red bell pepper, seeded and diced	½ teaspoon black pepper
	Sliced chives for garnish

- 1 Place the bread on a plate, sprinkle it with the vinegar, and let sit until thoroughly moistened, 5 minutes.
- 2 Combine the tomato juice, cucumbers, scallions, and red pepper in a large bowl.
- 3 Transfer about one-fourth of the vegetable mixture to a blender or food processor. Add the moistened bread, garlic, olive oil, jalapeños, sugar, salt, and pepper. Puree until smooth.
- 4 Pour the puree into the bowl with the vegetables. Stir to combine. Thin with more tomato juice if desired and adjust seasonings. Chill for at least 2 hours. Serve cold and garnish with chives. Store in the refrigerator for up to 2 days.

Remember: Because the taste of tomato juice is so dominant in gazpacho, the juice you choose is important. Read the labels carefully before purchasing a juice. Reject any juices with weird ancillary ingredients. If Mother Nature had intended bisulfates to be in tomato juice, she would have put them in tomatoes. Don't even think about buying tomato juices containing sugar or Bloody Mary spices. Tomatoes and salt are all you really want to see on that label.



Corn and Chile Chowder

You can make this lovely corn soup year-round if you use an excellent canned or frozen corn. It makes a nice first course for a dinner party with a grilled meat entree. To make the Corn and Chile Chowder or any milk-based soup in advance and freeze, cook until the end of Step 1. Then freeze. To defrost and finish, warm the corn mixture in a soup pot and continue the recipe at Step 2.

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Cooking time: 40 minutes

Yield: 4 to 6 servings (6 cups)

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 medium yellow onion, diced

1 teaspoon salt

4 cups fresh or canned corn kernels, drained
(8 ears fresh corn, two and a half 12-ounce cans, or three 10-ounce packages, frozen)

2 to 3 cloves garlic, peeled and minced

1 teaspoon ground cumin

3 poblano or Anaheim chiles, roasted, peeled, seeded, and diced (see Chapter 3 of Book I)

2 cups milk or half-and-half

2 cups chicken stock

Garnish: ½ bunch chives, thinly sliced diagonally (¼ cup)

- 1 Heat the olive oil in a large stockpot over medium heat. Sauté the onion with the salt until golden brown, about 15 minutes. Add the corn, turn the heat to high, and cook for 5 to 7 minutes, until slightly browned. Stir in the garlic and cumin and cook, stirring frequently, 2 minutes longer. Reduce the heat to low, stir in the chiles, and cook for 2 to 3 more minutes.
- 2 Pour in the milk and chicken stock. Bring to a simmer over low heat, being careful not to boil. Gently simmer, uncovered, for 15 minutes.
- 3 Pour one-third of the soup into a food processor or blender and puree. Stir back into the stockpot and simmer for 5 minutes longer. Serve hot, garnished with chives.

Vary It! If you can't get your hands on the more exotic chiles, substitute 2 green bell peppers and 2 jalapeños, both roasted and diced.



Tortilla Soup

Tortilla soup, probably the best known of the Mexican soups, is a brilliant use of two common Mexican leftovers — tortillas and salsa. If you don't feel like making the Red Roasted Tomato Salsa first, you can substitute a favorite bottled smooth red salsa. You can also simply puree the following ingredients in the blender: 1½ pounds of Roma tomatoes, 6 cloves garlic, 1 small yellow onion, and ½ cup water and add to the pot along with the stock.

Preparation time: 15 minutes, plus 15 minutes for Red Roasted Tomato Salsa

Cooking time: 1 hour

Yield: 6 servings

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 large yellow onion, diced

3 cloves garlic, peeled and minced

2 cups Red Roasted Tomato Salsa (see the recipe earlier in this chapter)

5 cups chicken stock

1 dried chipotle chile, stemmed and seeded (optional)

1 teaspoon salt

¾ pound fried tortilla chips

Garnishes: 1 bunch cilantro leaves (½ cup); 1 avocado, peeled, seeded, and coarsely chopped; ½ cup Crema (see Chapter 6 of Book I); 2 limes, cut in wedges

- 1 Heat the olive oil in a large stockpot over low heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring frequently, until pale brown and caramelized, 10 to 15 minutes. Stir in the garlic and cook 10 minutes longer.
- 2 Pour in the tomato salsa, chicken stock, chipotle chile (if desired), and salt. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook, uncovered, for 20 minutes. Stir in the fried tortilla chips and cook 10 minutes longer, until the chips soften. Remove and discard the chile. Serve hot, topped with cilantro, avocado, Crema, and lime wedges.



Border salads

Tostadas are wonderful, healthy salads served on edible fried tortilla plates. With their small meat portions, they make terrific all-in-one suppers. You also can think of them as healthy sandwiches because they combine carbohydrates (corn), veggies, and a little bit of meat.

The key to a terrific tostada is to season each part separately and well. The chicken or meat, as well as the salad, should be moistened and seasoned with dressing so that every bite is moist and flavorful. You almost force

people to eat the perfect balance of foods by putting something with acidity and texture on top of something rich like the beans. If you serve salad on the side, people tend to eat it separately.

Making the bean salad in this section is a snap if you keep these tips in mind:

- ✔ As much as we love our beans, nothing is worse than undercooked or overcooked beans in a salad. Always test beans for doneness by biting into the smallest, densest one. The center should be creamy, and all the beans should hold their shape.
- ✔ Anytime you're dressing beans or lentils for a salad, they absorb the dressing better if you coat them while they're still slightly warm.

Chicken Tostada Salad

In a tostada, spread the beans out to all the edges and scatter the other components evenly. Each bite should deliver a combination of flavors. Who wants a mouthful of plain tortilla with those wonderful tastes congregating in the middle?

Preparation time: 25 minutes

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: 4 servings (8 tostadas)

¾ pound cooked, shredded chicken

1 small red onion, diced

1 bunch cilantro leaves, chopped (about ½ cup)

1 small or ½ large head romaine lettuce, finely shredded

1 medium tomato, cored, seeded, and diced

½ cup (2 ounces) grated añejo cheese

½ cup red wine vinegar

¾ cup olive oil

Salt and pepper to taste

¾ cup vegetable oil for frying

8 large (6-inch) corn tortillas or 8 prepared tostada shells

1 cup Refried Black Beans (see the recipe later in this chapter) or good-quality canned refried beans

Garnishes: 3 tablespoons Crema (see Chapter 6 of Book I) and 1 large avocado or 2 medium avocados, peeled, seeded, and thinly sliced

- 1** Combine the chicken, onion, and cilantro in a medium bowl.
- 2** In another bowl, combine the lettuce, tomato, and cheese.
- 3** To make the dressing, combine the red wine vinegar, olive oil, and salt and pepper in a small jar or bottle. Cover and shake vigorously to combine, or whisk the ingredients together.
- 4** Pour the vegetable oil to a depth of ½ inch in a small frying pan. Heat the oil over moderate heat. Fry the tortillas, using tongs to turn them over so that the tortillas are crisp on both sides. Drain on paper towels.

- 5 Heat the beans through in a small pot over low heat, stirring often to prevent sticking. Add some water if the beans are dry.
- 6 To assemble, spread a thin layer of beans on each crisp tortilla. Drizzle with about 1 teaspoon Crema and top with a few avocado slices. Pour enough dressing on the reserved chicken mixture to coat generously and toss well. Scatter over the tortillas. Toss the remaining dressing with the lettuce mixture and generously cover each tostada with it.



Fiesta Bean Salad

We jazz up a typical American-style bean salad with three different beans and a colorful confetti of diced peppers. This versatile salad is a great choice for a buffet table or picnic because it can remain out without wilting. Or serve it as an accompaniment to a full-flavored entrée like ribs or fried chicken.

Preparation time: 10 minutes, plus 2 hours chilling

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

1 red bell pepper

1 yellow bell pepper

1 poblano chile

½ cup olive oil

¼ cup red wine vinegar

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon pepper

1 small red onion, finely diced

1 cup canned, drained black beans

1 cup canned, drained pinto beans

1 cup canned, drained red beans or kidney beans

½ bunch cilantro leaves, coarsely chopped (¼ cup)

- 1 Core and seed the bell peppers and poblano and cut them into ¼-inch cubes. The pepper and chile cubes should be similar to the size of the cooked beans.
- 2 To make the dressing, in a large bowl whisk together the olive oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper. Toss in the diced peppers, chile, onion, beans, and cilantro, and mix well. Refrigerate for 2 hours or overnight before serving.

Vary It! If you have a smoker, try smoking the beans for Fiesta Bean Salad. A chipotle chile pureed into the dressing emphasizes the smokiness of the beans, giving the whole salad a heartier taste.



Side Dishes

No matter how much time we spend in the professional kitchen, we're always awed by the inventiveness of Mexican cooks, who create a healthy and exciting cuisine with such a simple handful of ingredients. Thanks to the creativity of Mexican cooks, meager ingredients like rice and beans are elevated to complex, sensual foods.

In these delicious side dishes, salsa, chiles, and herbs bring rice to a whole new level of interest. Beans are mashed and enriched with fat to make luxuriously creamy refried beans. Old tortillas never die or get thrown out; instead, they are reborn as crispy, scrumptious tortilla chips and tostadas.

In addition to their ability to breathe new life into simple ingredients, some of these side dishes are also very healthy. Remember that combining beans (without lard, of course) and rice forms a full protein.

This section focuses on the simple, inexpensive side dishes that most Mexican meals are built around. In most Mexican homes, a pot of beans is always bubbling on a burner, some rice is in the fridge for reheating, and tortillas are always present.

Getting the rice spirit

The Mexican method for cooking rice is a great example of how the simplest foods can become a special occasion in the hands of gifted cooks. Frying the rice to develop a toasty flavor and then infusing it with salsa to give it color, flavor, and pizzazz is one of the most exciting techniques we've learned from the Mexican kitchen. Although cooking rice the Mexican way takes more time than the ways you may be used to cooking rice, these special rice dishes are well worth the extra effort.



To get the most from your Mexican rice, you need to start with the right ingredients and treat them right during preparation. Follow these tips to increase your success:

- ✔ Start with well-rinsed long-grain rice. We always rinse rice before cooking to remove the excess starch that causes gumminess. To rinse the rice, place it in a large bowl, not a colander, and rinse under cold running water for 5 minutes, or until the water runs clear. Keep stirring the grains with your hand to loosen starch particles.
- ✔ If your recipe calls for you to toast the rice (which is done on the stove top in a skillet, rather than in the oven), go for a full golden color and roasted aroma.
- ✔ Always let your rice rest before serving it. Doing so allows the rice to finish cooking and cool slightly.

- ✓ Stirring rice with a spoon to cool it down can break delicate grains. Instead, use a fork to gently separate the rice and cool it down before serving it. Cool overcooked or mushy rice by emptying it out onto a baking sheet and spreading it thinly so that air can circulate.
- ✓ For an interesting twist, try tossing some broken, dry spaghetti or tiny, whole orzo (tiny, rice-shaped pasta) into the pot along with the rice and fry until golden. If you want to add the spaghetti, use the thin-style spaghetti and break it into small pieces of about ¼ inch.
- ✓ More is always better than less when adding chiles and salsas to these rice dishes. Creating a full-flavored rice takes a gutsy dose of spice and salsa. (Chapter 2 of Book I tells you all about chiles. We discuss salsa earlier in this chapter.)

Red Rice

This basic tomato-tinged rice accompanies many Mexican dishes. You can make the Red Roasted Tomato Salsa, which gives the rice its color, as long as a week in advance.

Preparation time: 5 minutes, plus 35 minutes for the Red Roasted Tomato Salsa

Cooking time: 45 minutes

Yield: 6 to 8 servings

3 tablespoons vegetable oil

1½ cups long-grain rice, rinsed

½ medium yellow onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

5 serrano chiles, or to taste, stemmed,
seeded if desired

2 cups chicken stock, vegetable stock, or water
(see the stock recipes earlier in this chapter)

1½ cups Red Roasted Tomato Salsa (see the
recipe earlier in this chapter)

- 1 Heat the oil in a medium-size heavy saucepan or skillet over medium-low heat. Sauté the rice, stirring constantly, until golden brown and crackling, about 5 minutes. Add the onion and sauté just until soft. Stir in the garlic, salt and pepper, and chiles and sauté until the aroma is released.
- 2 Pour in the stock or water and the salsa, mixing well to combine. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, cover, and cook for 20 minutes. Let rest 10 minutes. Fluff with a fork and serve hot.



Beautiful, beautiful refried beans!

With their dollop of richness from lard or other fat, refried beans are an inexpensive way to satisfy the universal need to feel full and happy. Refrieds are a little more special than ordinary beans, and they're typically served alongside small snacks like tacos or enchiladas to round out the meal.



Wash and pick over your beans before cooking. Wash them in a colander with cold water and then spread the beans out on a cookie sheet or counter. Pull out and discard any stray dirt, stones, or shriveled beans.

The following recipe calls for lard because that is the most typical Mexican fat for beans and it adds a hint of pork flavor that makes the dish delicious. You can't fry beans without fat, but you can use different fats if lard isn't to your liking. In place of the lard, you can substitute bacon drippings, vegetable oil, or half butter and half olive oil in the same quantity as specified.

Chapter 3 of Book I offers additional tips for working with beans.

Refried Black Beans

Frying beans with a bit of fat and onion accentuates their rich, creamy quality. Our own tastes tend toward even more lard than the following recipes calls for, but we don't want to scare away the faint-hearted. Feel free to increase the lard for a richer, more authentic refried bean. Remember that if you don't eat refried beans with lots of meat or protein, the overall proportion of fat in the meal isn't unhealthy.

Preparation time: 10 minutes

Cooking time: 1 hour and 30 minutes

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

2 cups dried black beans, washed and picked over

8 cups water

1/3 cup lard or vegetable oil

1 large onion, diced

1/2 teaspoons salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

- 1 Place the beans and water in a large pot and bring to a boil. Cover, reduce to a simmer, and cook for 1 hour and 15 minutes, or until the beans are tender and creamy in the center. (To test for doneness, taste 3 or 4 of the smaller beans.) Crush the beans in their liquid with a potato masher or the back of a wooden spoon.
- 2 Heat the lard or vegetable oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Sauté the onion with the salt and pepper until golden, about 10 minutes. Add the beans and their liquid and continue cooking over medium heat, stirring frequently, until the liquid evaporates and the beans form a creamy mass that pulls away from the bottom and sides of the pan, about 15 minutes. Serve immediately.

Vary It! If you're lucky enough to find epazote (see Chapter 2 of Book I), add a sprig or two to the pot of the refried beans for the last 15 minutes to give the beans an authentic flavor. Epazote has also been known to counteract the unpleasant side effect of beans on the digestive system!



Spicing things up with veggie sides

We love to eat our veggies. In fact, if we weren't chefs, we just may cross the line and become vegetarians.

So many of our customers in Los Angeles want to eat light and healthy that we always take special care with our vegetable dishes so that they're as special as everything else on the menu. These Mexican sides are so rich tasting and flavorful that you may wonder how you ever settled for steamed vegetables.

Poblano Mashed Potatoes

These spicy, rich potatoes are one of the most frequently requested recipes at our restaurants. Serve with an entree of equal heft.

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Cooking time: 35 minutes

Yield: 6 servings

2½ pounds baking potatoes, peeled and quartered

1½ tablespoons salt

1 cup sour cream

½ cup olive oil

5 poblano chiles, roasted, peeled, seeded, and diced (see Chapter 3 of Book I for more information on working with chiles)

Salt and pepper to taste

- 1 Place the potatoes in a large saucepan. Pour in enough water to cover and add the 1½ tablespoons salt. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook, uncovered, until soft, about 25 minutes. Drain well, return the potatoes to the pan, and, while still warm, mash with a potato masher or food mill until slightly chunky.
- 2 In a small pot, combine the sour cream, olive oil, and chiles and warm over low heat just until warm to the touch. Too much heat causes the sour cream to separate.
- 3 Add the sour cream mixture to the potatoes and gently stir just to combine. Season with salt and pepper and serve immediately.

Warning: *The worst thing you can do to these mashed potatoes is overmix them, which leads to gummy, starchy potatoes. Gently combine them with the sour cream mixture just until mixed.*



Spicy Grilled Corn

Here is a refined version of a popular Mexican street snack. Just one bite leaves you wondering how you could ever go back to plain old buttered corn.

Preparation time: 15 minutes, plus 10 minutes soaking

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: 6 servings

6 ears fresh sweet corn, in the husk

4 tablespoons butter, softened

Salt and pepper to taste

2 arbol chiles, seeded, stemmed, and coarsely chopped

2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro

1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice

- 1 Preheat the grill to medium-hot.
- 2 Carefully remove the corn silks, leaving the husks attached. Soak the ears of corn in their husks in a large bowl or sink of cold water for 10 minutes.
- 3 In a small bowl, mix together the softened butter, salt and pepper, chiles, cilantro, and lime juice until smooth. Set aside.
- 4 Drain the corn well and place each husk-enclosed ear on the hot grill. Cook for about 12 minutes, turning frequently. The corn is steamed when it loses its raw crunch. Remove each cob from the grill and, when cool enough to handle, strip off and discard the husks.
- 5 Brush each cob with the seasoned butter mixture and return to the grill for a minute or two just to heat. Serve immediately.



Chapter 5

The Main Event

In This Chapter

- ▶ Cooking delicious fish, Mexican style
- ▶ Marinating chicken for maximum effect
- ▶ Cooking Mexico's native bird, the turkey
- ▶ Trying your hand at traditional pork and beef dishes

This chapter is the meat of the book. Here you find a whole host of tried and true recipes that serve as wonderful main courses for your Mexican meal. Combine these with the starters and side dishes in Chapter 4 of Book I and the desserts in Chapter 6 of Book I, and you'll be eating Mexican from beginning to end — our idea of the perfect meal!

Recipes in This Chapter

- ▶ Shrimp in a Garlic Bath
- ▶ Grilled Swordfish with Fresh Tomato and Herb Salsa
- ▶ Pan-Seared Bass with Chile Lime Broth
- ▶ Citrus Chicken with Orange Cilantro Salsa
- ▶ Chipotle Glazed Chicken
- ▶ Chipotle Black Bean Turkey Chili
- ▶ Baby Back Ribs Adobado
- ▶ Pork Chile Verde
- ▶ Cumin and Chile Marinated Skirt Steak



Fish and Seafood Dishes

With Mexico's 6,000 miles of coastline along the Pacific Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, Sea of Cortez, and the Caribbean, it's not surprising that fresh fish plays such an important part in the Mexican diet. Mexicans eat fresh fish in sparkling ceviches, rustic seafood stews, impressive whole fish entrées, and quick tacos and enchiladas.

Shrimp in a Garlic Bath

In this traditional dish, called *al mojo de ajo* in Mexico, a quick, rustic sauce of garlic and dried chile slivers is cooked in the same pan as juicy rock shrimp.

Preparation time: 10 minutes

Cooking time: 20 minutes

Yield: 2 servings

¼ cup olive oil

10 cloves garlic, peeled and thinly sliced

¾ pound rock or medium shrimp, peeled, deveined, washed, and dried

Salt and pepper to taste

1 large ancho chile, wiped clean, stemmed, seeded, and finely julienned (see Chapter 3 of Book I for more information on working with chiles)

3 tablespoons chicken stock or clam juice

1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice

2 tablespoons chopped fresh Italian parsley

2 cups cooked white rice

- 1 Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-low heat. Cook the garlic slices until tender but not brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer with a slotted spoon to paper towels and reserve.
- 2 Turn the heat under the pan up to high. Quickly toss the shrimp with the salt and pepper in a bowl. When the oil is nearly smoking, add the shrimp. Sauté, stirring and shaking the pan to prevent sticking, 3 to 4 minutes or just until the shrimp are still slightly undercooked. Remove from the heat. With a slotted spoon, transfer the shrimp to a platter, leaving as much liquid as possible in the pan.
- 3 Return the pan to the burner and reduce the heat to medium. Add the garlic slices and chile and sauté, stirring frequently, until the oil begins to turn orange from the chile. Stir in the chicken stock or clam juice, along with the shrimp and any juice that has collected on the platter. Add the lime juice and parsley, bring to a boil, and remove from the heat. Serve immediately over white rice.

Tip: Whatever you do, don't reduce the quantity of garlic called for in this recipe. What's the point of a mild-mannered garlic bath? The trick is to cook the garlic slowly and carefully, without browning, for a delicious sauce that doesn't overpower the fish.



Grilled Swordfish with Fresh Tomato and Herb Salsa

Our favorite fish preparations are often the simplest, and things don't get much simpler than this recipe. A fresh tomato and herb salsa supplies just enough bright acidity, color, and texture to highlight the fish, without overpowering it like a cooked sauce might.

Preparation time: 15 minutes, plus 15 minutes chilling time

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: 6 servings

½ cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon pepper

6 ripe tomatoes, seeded and diced

½ bunch oregano leaves, chopped (¼ cup)

½ bunch Italian parsley leaves, chopped (¼ cup)

½ bunch cilantro leaves, chopped (¼ cup)

3 tablespoons capers, chopped with juice

3 scallions, light green and white parts, thinly sliced

6 skinless swordfish fillets, 6 ounces each

Sea salt and black pepper to taste

- 1** To make the salsa, combine the olive oil, salt, pepper, tomatoes, oregano, cilantro, parsley, capers, and scallions in a bowl. Reserve in the refrigerator.
- 2** Season the fish all over with the sea salt and pepper. Cook on a very hot, clean grill, about 3 minutes per side. The inside should be bright pink. Transfer to a platter and chill 15 minutes.
- 3** Arrange the fillets on individual plates. Spoon the salsa over the fish and serve cold.

Vary It! Sure, oregano, cilantro, and parsley are good choices for the Fresh Tomato and Herb Salsa. But a fresh salsa such as this one is no time to be fussy. Substitute other herbs, such as tarragon, chervil, basil, or chives, as the spirit (or the marketplace) moves you.





Cooking fish to perfection

The trickiest part about cooking fish properly is judging when it's done. An additional minute or two of high heat can make a big difference with such tender flesh.

We're big believers in slightly undercooking fish because it continues to cook even after you remove it from the heat. If you cook fish all the way through, it will probably taste dry by the time it's served. At our restaurants, we cook our

fillets until opaque on either side but still slightly translucent in the middle.

To judge doneness, trust your senses rather than the clock because too many variables come into play when you're cooking delicate fish. Toss out those old-fashioned cooking charts and use the tip of a knife to pull aside the flesh and peek at the center to judge for yourself.

Pan-Seared Bass with Chile Lime Broth

Popular sea bass is a great choice for home entertaining. You can't easily overcook it, and it holds its own with assertive flavors like olives, garlic, chiles, and lime. For a complete meal, serve with wedges of roasted potatoes and seared greens.

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Cooking time: 20 minutes

Yield: 4 servings

1½ pounds skinless, boneless fillet of sea bass, or other firm-fleshed fish, cut in 4 portions

Salt and pepper to taste

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 small yellow onion, thinly sliced

4 cloves garlic, peeled and minced

2 serrano chiles, stemmed and sliced in ¼-inch disks

1 lime, cut in 8 wedges

1 tomato, cored, seeded, and cut in strips

½ bunch fresh oregano leaves, coarsely chopped (¼ cup)

½ cup Spanish green olives, sliced

½ cup white wine

¾ cup fish stock or clam juice

- 1 Season the fish fillets evenly with salt and pepper. Heat one very large skillet or two medium skillets over medium-high heat for a minute and then coat the pans with the olive oil. Add the fillets and turn the heat to very high. Sear until golden brown, about 2 minutes, then flip to sear the other side, about 1 minute. Transfer the fillets to a rack over a plate to catch the juices, and reserve.
- 2 Return the pan (or pans) to high heat. Add the onion slices and sauté, stirring frequently, for 1 minute or until they start to brown. Add the garlic, chile slices, lime wedges, tomatoes, oregano, and olives and sauté briskly for 1 minute. Add the wine and boil until reduced by half.
- 3 Pour in the fish stock or clam juice, bring to a boil, and then reduce to a simmer. Return the fish fillets, along with their juices, to the pan. Cover and cook gently for 2 minutes or longer, depending on the thickness of fillets. Taste the broth and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper. Serve immediately in soup plates with a generous puddle of broth and garnish of vegetables.

Tip: *If you've ever considered preparing fish for a crowd but ruled it out as too scary, this light, healthy, one-skillet dish is a great choice. We've prepared it for 500 guests at a time without a hitch. To serve a large group, just pan-sear all the fish, transfer to a casserole, cover with foil, and reserve. Then, when it's time to serve, cook the sauce in a few pans, pour over the fish, and finish cooking in a 350-degree oven for about 5 minutes. What a great party dish!*



Chicken and Turkey Dishes

If you've been stuck in the same old lemon, parsley, and garlic rut with your poultry, take a walk on the wild side and try cooking your next chicken or turkey Mexican style. Doing so is bound to give you a tangier, spicier perspective on meats that you don't often look to for new taste sensations.

Citrus Chicken with Orange Cilantro Salsa

As flavor mavens, we've developed a special method for cooking chicken breast, one of the least flavorful cuts of meat. First we boost flavor with a strong marinade, and then we moisten the grilled meat some more with a sprightly salsa. The natural sugar in the orange juice caramelizes and adds the perfect sweetness. This choice is great for your summer barbecues.

Preparation time: 15 minutes, plus 35 minutes for Red Roasted Tomato Salsa, plus 6 hours marination

Cooking time: 25 minutes

Yield: 6 servings

½ cup freshly squeezed orange juice

2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice

1 morita chile or 3 arbol chiles or 1 chipotle

¾ cup Red Roasted Tomato Salsa (see Chapter 4 of Book I)

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

½ teaspoon salt

6 whole chicken breasts, boneless with skin on Orange Cilantro Salsa (see the following recipe)

- 1** To make the marinade, combine the orange juice, lime juice, and chile in a small saucepan and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer and cook, uncovered, until the chile is plump, about 5 minutes. Set aside to cool and pour into a blender. Add the Red Roasted Tomato Salsa, oil, and salt and puree until smooth.
- 2** Wash the chicken breasts and place them in a large stainless steel or plastic container. Pour on the marinade, cover, and refrigerate for at least 6 hours.
- 3** Preheat the grill or broiler until medium-hot.
- 4** Grill the chicken breasts, skin side down on the grill, or skin side up in the broiler, about 3 minutes. Then turn and cook the other side, moving away from direct heat. Keep turning the chicken every minute or two to prevent it from blackening or sticking. Total cooking time is about 12 minutes for small breasts and about 20 minutes for larger breasts. If checking meat with a thermometer, the internal temperature should be 175 degrees. Remove breasts from the heat for about 5 minutes. Serve over Red Rice and Refried Black Beans (see Chapter 4 of Book I) and top with the Orange Cilantro Salsa.

Tip: Grilling chicken breasts calls for careful technique. With any citrus marinade, you need to be watchful not to burn the meat because the sugars in the juice caramelize quickly on the grill. The trick is to stay nearby and keep turning the chicken frequently, never blackening the skin or meat. We always keep the skin on for flavor, moisture, and a little insurance against charring. If guests prefer skinless chicken, we just remove it before serving.

Vary It! Leftover Citrus Chicken is delicious served at room temperature the next day. For a quick main-course salad, slice the chicken and serve over mixed bitter greens, using the salsa as part of the dressing.

Orange Cilantro Salsa

A refreshing fruit and herb salsa, such as this one, is also great over grilled salmon. Make the salsa no more than a day ahead to really enjoy the freshness.

Preparation time: 10 minutes

Yield: 1½ to 2 cups

4 oranges or other citrus fruit, peeled and sectioned

1 bunch cilantro, leaves and stems, coarsely chopped (½ cup)

2 serrano chiles, stemmed and thinly sliced

1 small red onion, freshly julienned

¼ cup olive oil

¼ cup red wine vinegar

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon cracked black pepper

Combine the oranges, cilantro, chiles, onion, olive oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper. Mix well and set aside or chill until serving time.



Chipotle Glazed Chicken

When roasting chicken, all anyone seems to know is the Italian method — a combination of lemon, olive oil, and herbs. It's delicious, but why not break out and try roasting a Mexican-style chicken for a change? Smoky, brown chipotles add a unique, complex touch to the sweet and sour glaze.

Preparation time: 15 minutes, plus 1 hour marination

Cooking time: 1 hour and 15 minutes

Yield: 4 servings

3-pound roasting chicken

3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

2 tablespoons paprika

3 tablespoons red wine vinegar

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 cup freshly squeezed orange juice

½ cup honey

⅔ cup red wine vinegar

3 canned chipotle chiles

Garnish: ½ bunch parsley leaves, coarsely chopped (¼ cup)

- 1 Rinse the chicken, remove any excess fat, and pat dry with paper towels. In a small bowl, mix together the garlic, salt and pepper, paprika, 3 tablespoons vinegar, and olive oil. Rub the vinegar mixture all over the chicken, including the cavity. Cover with plastic wrap and marinate, at room temperature, for 1 hour.
- 2 Preheat the oven to 450 degrees.
- 3 To make the glaze, combine the orange juice, honey, ⅔ cup vinegar, and chiles in a small saucepan. Cook over medium heat until the liquid is reduced by half. Strain, pushing the chiles through a sieve, and reserve.
- 4 Unwrap the chicken and place in a roasting pan. Roast for 15 minutes. Then reduce the heat to 375 degrees and continue roasting for another 45 minutes. Begin brushing glaze generously all over the chicken, every 5 minutes until done, about another 20 minutes. When a leg can be loosely twisted, the chicken is done. Sprinkle with parsley, let rest 10 minutes, and serve.



Chipotle Black Bean Turkey Chili

This updated, reduced-fat chili features three of our favorite ingredients: smoky chipotle chiles, creamy beans, and rich, meaty turkey. A chili this satisfying doesn't need a lot of garnishes — a dab of sour cream and a moist square of corn bread are all it takes to round out the meal.

Preparation time: 10 minutes

Cooking time: 2 hours

Yield: 4 servings

2 cups dry black beans

8 cups water

2 arbol chiles

3 bay leaves

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 pound coarsely ground turkey, dark meat

1 large yellow onion, diced

1½ teaspoons salt

½ teaspoon pepper

3 cloves garlic, peeled and minced

2 green bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, and diced

1 tablespoon chili powder

1 tablespoon ground cumin

4 canned chipotle chiles, stemmed and minced

2½ cups chicken stock

Garnish: Sour cream

- 1 Place the beans in a large pot with 8 cups water, arbol chiles, and bay leaves. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cover. Cook until tender, about 1 hour. Remove the chiles and bay leaves and discard. Don't drain the beans.
- 2 Heat the vegetable oil in a large heavy pot over medium-high heat. Fry the turkey, stirring often and breaking up with a spoon, until evenly browned. Add the onion, salt, and pepper and sauté over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until lightly golden, about 10 minutes. Stir in the garlic, green peppers, chili powder, cumin, and chipotles. Cook, stirring frequently, for 3 minutes, or until aromas are released.
- 3 Stir in the black beans, their liquid, and the chicken stock and cook, uncovered, for 40 minutes or until the flavors have blended and the chili has thickened. Serve in bowls with a dollop of sour cream on top.

Tip: Like all good chilis, Chipotle Black Bean Turkey Chili is a great dish to make ahead and freeze for a party. You can store it in the refrigerator a few days or freeze as long as 4 weeks.



Beef and Pork Dishes

Although beef and pork are beloved in Mexico, they aren't often featured as a meal's centerpiece. In traditional foods like posole or mole, Mexicans eat a small amount of meat along with a healthful array of fresh vegetables and spices so that the focus is on the artfulness of the whole dish rather than on the quality of a lone slice of beef. And although Mexicans greatly enjoy beef and pork, they don't eat those meats every day, but a few times a week, as one small part of a larger meal.

Mexican cooks are legendary for cooking inexpensive cuts of beef and pork to perfection. Nothing goes to waste. Stomachs, intestines, hooves, ears, tongues, and butts are slowly cooked with just the right amount of lime and chiles to enhance their natural flavors without overwhelming their essential meatiness.

Baby Back Ribs Adobado

Ribs need special attention to cook up tender, juicy, and falling off the bone. We like to first give ours a strong spice rub for flavor, followed by a steamy bake for tenderness, and then a quick turn on the grill or in a high oven for a crisp edge and some smoke.

Because undercooked ribs are so awful, steaming a little longer can never hurt.

Preparation time: 20 minutes, plus 2 hours refrigeration, plus 1 hour and 25 minutes to make the Adobado

Cooking time: 1 hour and 35 minutes

Yield: 4 servings

¼ cup paprika

¼ cup ground ancho chiles or chili powder

¼ cup cumin

2 tablespoons salt

4½ pounds pork baby back ribs

3 cups Adobado (see following recipe)

- 1 Combine the paprika, chiles, cumin, and salt in a small bowl. Pat the spice mixture all over the ribs. Place in a pan, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight.
- 2 Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
- 3 Place the ribs in a single layer in a baking pan and pour in water to a depth of about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch. Bake, uncovered, for 45 minutes. Cover with foil and return to the oven for an additional 30 minutes.
- 4 Meanwhile, make the Adobado.
- 5 Turn up the oven heat to 450 degrees or heat the grill to medium-high.

- 6 If finishing the ribs in the oven, brush generously with the Adobado and bake for another 10 minutes per side, basting every 5 minutes. To grill, generously glaze the ribs and grill for 5 minutes per side, frequently brushing with additional Adobado sauce. Cut the ribs apart and serve hot.

Tip: *Inexpensive country-style ribs, available at the supermarket, are a meaty, tasty alternative to baby back ribs. After applying the spice rub, steam in a sealed heavy-duty plastic bag in the top of a double boiler over simmering water for 45 minutes. Then finish in a hot oven as we describe in Step 6.*

Adobado

Adobado is a very traditional, sweet, tart Mexican barbecue sauce. It's great to have on hand for heating up with leftover bits of chicken, pork, or lamb and for serving on rolls for delicious barbecue sandwiches.

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Cooking time: 1 hour and 5 minutes

Yield: 3 cups

6 ancho chiles, wiped clean	2 cups chicken stock
¼ cup white vinegar	1 tablespoon brown sugar
1 cup water	2 tablespoons freshly squeezed orange juice
2 tablespoons olive oil	2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
1 medium yellow onion, thinly sliced	1 tablespoon tomato paste
3 garlic cloves, peeled and sliced	½ tablespoon salt
½ tablespoon ground cumin	⅛ teaspoon pepper

- 1 Briefly toast the chiles directly over a medium gas flame or in a cast-iron skillet until soft and brown, turning frequently to avoid scorching (see Chapter 3 of Book I). Transfer the toasted chiles to a saucepan and add the vinegar and water. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook for 10 minutes to soften.
- 2 Transfer the chiles and liquid to a blender or food processor. Puree until a smooth paste the consistency of barbecue sauce or ketchup is formed, adding 1 or 2 tablespoons of water if necessary to thin. Set aside.
- 3 Heat the olive oil in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Sauté the onion until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Stir in the garlic and cook briefly just to release the aroma. Then stir in the cumin and cook for another minute. Add the chicken stock and reserved chile paste. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook for 20 minutes.
- 4 Meanwhile, mix together the brown sugar, orange juice, lemon juice, tomato paste, salt, and pepper to form a paste. Add to the simmering stock mixture and cook for 15 minutes longer. You can store Adobado in the refrigerator for 1 week or frozen indefinitely.



Pork Chile Verde

Tart, green tomatillos are perfect for cutting the richness of pork — our favorite stewing meat and a popular meat in Mexico. What makes this dish typically Mexican is its focus on chiles rather than beans. To round out the meal, serve with warm tortillas and Red Rice (see Chapter 4 of Book I), which provides a delightful contrast.

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Cooking time: 2 hours and 30 minutes, plus 50 minutes for Red Rice

Yield: 6 to 8 servings

2½ pounds boneless pork butt or shoulder,
trimmed of fat and cut into 2-inch cubes

Salt and pepper to taste

Flour for dredging

¼ cup vegetable oil

2 small yellow onions, cut into 1-inch chunks

3 poblano chiles, cut into 1-inch chunks

4 jalapeños, seeded and finely chopped

3 cloves garlic, minced

1½ pounds tomatillos, roasted, peeled, and
chopped (see Chapter 3 of Book I for tips on
roasting)

2 teaspoons dried oregano

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 bunch cilantro leaves, chopped (½ cup)

3 cups chicken stock

- 1 Generously season the pork with salt and pepper. Lightly coat with the flour. Heat the oil in a large, heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Fry the pork in small batches until well browned on all sides. With a slotted spoon or tongs, transfer the pork to a wide, heavy soup pot.
- 2 Drain the fat from the pan. Place the onions in the same skillet and cook over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until limp, about 5 minutes. Add the poblano chiles and jalapeños and cook for 4 minutes longer. Stir in the garlic and cook for about 2 minutes longer.
- 3 Transfer the onion-chile mixture to the pot with the pork. Add the tomatillos, oregano, cumin, and cilantro. Pour in the chicken stock and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer and cook, uncovered, for 2 hours, or until the pork is fork tender. Adjust the seasonings with salt and pepper.

Vary It! To turn our green chile red, substitute 2 red bell peppers for the poblanos, 1½ pounds tomatoes for the tomatillos, and 3 tablespoons ground red chile for the jalapeños and eliminate the cilantro.



Cumin and Chile Marinated Skirt Steak

This marinated skirt steak is so flavorful that all it needs is some rice and beans (see Chapter 4 of Book I for ideas).

Preparation time: 20 minutes, plus 4 hours marination

Cooking time: 15 minutes

Yield: 6 servings

1/3 cup cumin seeds

6 serrano chiles, stemmed, cut in half, and seeded, if desired

6 cloves garlic, peeled

1/2 cup freshly squeezed lime juice

2 bunches cilantro, including stems and leaves (1 cup)

1/2 cup olive oil

Salt and pepper to taste

3 pounds skirt steak, trimmed of excess fat and cut into 6 serving pieces

- 1 Lightly toast the cumin seeds in a dry medium skillet over low heat just until their aroma is released, about 5 minutes. Transfer the seeds to a blender.
- 2 Add the serranos, garlic, and lime juice and puree until the cumin seeds are finely ground. Then add the cilantro, olive oil, and salt and pepper and puree until smooth.
- 3 Generously sprinkle the steak all over with salt and pepper. Generously brush all over with the cumin seed marinade and roll each piece up into a cylinder. Arrange the rolled steaks in a shallow pan and pour on the remaining marinade. Cover and marinate in the refrigerator for at least 4 hours or as long as a day.
- 4 About 30 minutes before cooking, remove the meat from the refrigerator. Unroll the steaks and place on a platter.
- 5 Preheat the grill or broiler to very hot.
- 6 Cook the steaks just until seared on both sides, about 4 minutes per side for medium rare (or pan-fry in a hot cast-iron skillet lightly coated with oil). Transfer to a cutting board and slice across the grain into diagonal strips. Serve hot with warm flour tortillas.



Chapter 6

Sweet Endings

In This Chapter

- ▶ Preparing the perfect pudding
- ▶ Making your own crema
- ▶ Sweetening your siesta with sorbet

Recipes in This Chapter

- ▶ Mexican Bread Pudding
- ▶ Flan
- ▶ Creamy Lemon Lime Pie
- ▶ Margarita Sorbet



Just as Mexicans prefer extremes at the spicy end of the spectrum, they also like their sweets extra sugary. Street vendors sell sticky, gooey candies, candy stores stock the candies to be nibbled throughout the day, and hardly a meal ends without its requisite flan, rice pudding, or some more elaborate dessert.

Our own tastes, on the other hand, veer toward simplicity — an ice-cold mango with a wedge of lime or a refreshing fruity ice cream sounds just fine at the end of a long, satisfying meal. And though we do offer a spectacular chocolate cake at the restaurant, we can't resist sneaking in something sour, like a topping of crème fraîche, to take the edge off all that sweetness.

The selections that follow reflect our respect for what's traditional in Mexico, our own acid-craving appetites, and the American hunger for a deliciously sweet reward for finishing dinner.

Old-Fashioned Desserts

Restaurants all over Mexico offer these unfussy puddings, the most traditional Mexican desserts. They're easy to prepare, taste just as good after a day in the refrigerator, and offer tummy-coating comfort after the excitement of a savory Mexican meal.

Mexican Bread Pudding

More like a soft and crunchy bread casserole than an eggy pudding, this sweet and savory dessert, known as *capirotada* (kah-pee-roh-tah-dah) in Mexico, is bound to appeal to those who don't usually like custards. It doesn't contain any eggs or milk.

Preparation time: 25 minutes

Cooking time: 20 minutes

Yield: 8 to 10 servings

8 tablespoons (1 stick) butter

½ loaf crusty Italian or French bread, crust on, cut into small cubes (about 6 cups)

1½ cups brown sugar

1½ cups water

1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon

½ cup golden raisins

1 large Granny Smith apple, peeled, cored and chopped

½ cup walnuts, chopped

½ pound crumbled añejo cheese

1 cup Crema (see the following recipe), heavy cream, or crème fraîche

- 1 Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Butter a glass casserole or lasagna pan.
- 2 Melt the butter in a medium saucepan, add the bread cubes, and stir them to coat evenly. Spread the cubes on a baking sheet and bake for 15 minutes, stirring once, or until lightly brown and crisp. Remove the bread and turn up the oven temperature to 400 degrees.
- 3 Combine the sugar and water in a small saucepan and bring to a boil. Remove the syrup from the heat. Stir in the cinnamon and the raisins and set aside.
- 4 In a large mixing bowl, combine the chopped apples, walnuts, cheese, and toasted bread cubes. Drizzle with the reserved sugar syrup and mix ingredients to evenly distribute the syrup. Transfer the mixture to the prepared pan.
- 5 Bake, uncovered, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes. Then bake an additional 5 minutes, without stirring, until the top is golden brown and crusty and the liquid is absorbed. Serve the bread pudding warm in bowls, with pitchers of Crema or heavy cream for adding at the table.

Crema

A drizzle of Crema adds that sour tang we crave with our sweets.

Preparation time: 5 minutes, plus 8 hours setting

Yield: 2 cups

2 cups heavy cream

¼ cup buttermilk

Whisk the cream and buttermilk together in a bowl. Cover and set the bowl in a warm place (a gas oven with just the heat from the pilot light is fine) for 8 hours until thick as custard. Store in the refrigerator for as long as a week.



The many faces of flan

For Coconut Flan: Substitute one 14-ounce can unsweetened coconut milk plus enough milk to make 2 cups for the 2 cups milk. (Make sure that you purchase unsweetened canned coconut milk. You can find it in the ethnic section of the market near the Thai ingredients. Don't buy the canned coconut milk in the beverage section because it's probably sweetened for cocktails like piña coladas and smoothies.) Sprinkle 1 cup of grated unsweetened coconut over the uncooked flan in the pan. When the flan is served, the coconut will be scattered on the bottom.

For Chocolate Flan: Use 5 rather than 6 whole eggs and stir 3 ounces chopped bittersweet chocolate into the milk mixture just before it boils.

For Red Yam Flan: In a large bowl, combine all the ingredients in the plain flan list with 1 cup cooked pureed yams, sweet potato, or pumpkin, 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon, 1½ teaspoons ground allspice, 1½ teaspoons ground clove, and 3 tablespoons dark rum. Mix well, strain into the caramel-coated pan, and bake.

Flan

One dessert you can count on in most Spanish or Mexican restaurants is this classic caramel-flavored, sweet and silky vanilla custard. The perfect make-in-advance dessert, flan is a soothing, light finale to spicy foods, and, as an added bonus, it keeps for a few days in the refrigerator without losing freshness or flavor.

Preparation time: 25 minutes, plus 4 hours refrigeration, plus 20 minutes for Caramel

Cooking time: 1 hour and 15 minutes

Yield: 8 to 10 servings

1 recipe Caramel (see the following recipe)	2 teaspoons vanilla extract
6 large eggs	2 cups milk
6 large egg yolks	2 cups half-and-half
One 14-ounce can sweetened condensed milk	1 vanilla bean

- 1 Prepare the Caramel and coat a 9-inch round cake pan.
- 2 Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.
- 3 In a large mixing bowl, gently whisk together the eggs, yolks, sweetened condensed milk, and vanilla extract. (Avoid incorporating air as happens when you whisk more briskly.)
- 4 Pour the milk and half-and-half into a medium saucepan. Split the vanilla bean lengthwise and, using the tip of a paring knife, scrape the black seeds into the milk. Add the bean also and bring the milk to a boil. Remove the saucepan from the heat.
- 5 Gradually pour the hot milk into the egg mixture, whisking constantly. Pass the milk and egg mixture through a strainer into the caramel-coated cake pan. Place the cake pan inside a large roasting pan and carefully pour hot tap water in the larger pan until it reaches halfway up the sides of the flan pan.
- 6 Bake for 1 hour and 10 minutes, until the center just feels firm when pressed with a finger. Set aside to cool in the pan of water. Then remove from the water bath, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate at least 4 hours or overnight.
- 7 To serve, run a knife along the inside edge of the pan and gently press the center of the bottom to loosen. Cover the pan with a platter, invert, and lift the pan off the flan. Cut the flan in wedges and serve topped with cold Caramel.

Tip: Vanilla beans, the long, thin, dried, brown pods sold in the supermarket spice section, are the fermented pods of a Mexican or Tahitian yellow orchid. Look for pliability when purchasing. A good vanilla pod should be as flexible as a dried apricot. To release the bean's essential oils and flavor, always split it lengthwise with the tip of a paring knife, and scrape the small brown seeds into whatever you're infusing. Those tiny dark seeds are the speckles in "pure" vanilla ice cream. Their perfume is unmistakable — some even say it's an aphrodisiac.

Caramel

A truly great flan should have a luxuriously silky consistency and a rich caramel flavor that lingers on the tongue. To make the caramel, you want to cook the sugar slowly, a longer time than you suspect, and watch it carefully. The color should turn from light caramel to dark coffee, and the fragrance should be rich and very caramel-like. You can store leftover sauce in the refrigerator and thin it with some hot water the next day.

Cooking time: 20 minutes, plus 1 hour chilling time

Yield: Enough for one 9-inch flan

2 cups sugar

1¼ cups water

- 1 Have ready a 9-inch round cake pan. Combine the sugar and ½ cup of the water in a medium saucepan. Cook over moderate heat, swirling the pan occasionally, until the color is dark brown and the mixture has a distinctive fragrance of caramel, about 15 minutes. Use a pastry brush dipped in cold water to wash down any sugar granules from the pot's sides. Pour enough of the hot caramel into a 9-inch round cake pan to coat the bottom and sides. Swirl to coat evenly.
- 2 Slowly and carefully add the remaining ¾ cup water to the caramel in the saucepan. Bring to a boil and cook over moderate heat until the caramel dissolves, about 5 minutes. Occasionally stir and brush down the sides with the pastry brush dipped in cold water to prevent crystallization. Set this caramel sauce aside to cool and then chill until serving time.



New Border Sweets

For these personal favorites, we've taken ingredients that ring true to Mexico and given them an American spin. A luscious cream pie and a refreshing tequila ice end any get-together, Mexican or not, on an upbeat, sugar-induced note. As an added bonus, both of these little gems are easy to prepare.

Creamy Lemon Lime Pie

Here is a delicious unbaked version of Key Lime Pie that you can simplify even more by substituting a baked graham cracker crust. It's one of our best-sellers at the Border Grill.

Special tools: Food processor, parchment paper

Preparation time: 10 minutes, plus 4 hours chilling for filling and 1 hour chilling for dough

Cooking time: 25 minutes

Yield: 6 to 8 servings

Empanada Dough (see Chapter 4 of Book I)

½ cup freshly squeezed lime juice

⅓ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice

1 pound cream cheese

14-ounce can sweetened condensed milk

Zest of 1 lime, finely grated, without any bitter white pith

1 cup heavy cream, cold

2 tablespoons powdered sugar

½ lime and ½ lemon

- 1 Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
- 2 On a floured board, roll out the dough into a ¼-inch thick, 12-inch circle. Place in a 9- or 10-inch glass pie plate. Trim the edges with a paring knife, leaving a ½- to ¾-inch overhang. Tuck under and crimp the edges. Chill for 1 hour. Prick the dough all over with a fork. Line the pie shell with parchment paper or foil; fill with raw beans, rice, or weights; and bake about 25 minutes or until very lightly browned. Remove from the oven, immediately remove the weights, and thoroughly cool on a rack.
- 3 Combine the lime and lemon juices, cream cheese, and sweetened condensed milk in the bowl of a food processor with a metal blade and mix until smooth, scraping down the sides often. Add the lime zest and mix thoroughly. Pour into the chilled pie shell and return to the refrigerator.
- 4 Meanwhile, whisk the cream and powdered sugar in a bowl until soft peaks form. Spread over the top of the pie. Slice 8 thin circles each of lime and lemon from the center of each fruit and cut each disk once from the center to the edge to make twists. Stand these twists upright, evenly spaced, along the edge of the pie and chill at least 4 hours or overnight. Serve cold.

Tip: In recipes that call for citrus zest and juice, grate the zest first and then juice the fruit. If your recipe calls for more zest than juice, store the leftover fruit, in its white pith, in the refrigerator.



Margarita Sorbet

Delicious, fresh fruit ices play such an important role in the Mexican diet that we offered handmade, miniature Popsicles at our first Mexican restaurant. The ingredients for this sparkling, tart, lime and tequila sorbet should be on the shelf of any well-stocked Mexican-style pantry.

Special tool: Ice-cream maker

Preparation time: 10 minutes, plus 30 minutes chilling for syrup and 1 hour for tequila mixture

Yield: 4 servings

1½ cups tequila

1 cup freshly squeezed lime juice

½ cup Triple Sec

½ cup light corn syrup

2 cups Simple Syrup (see the following recipe)

½ cup water

- 1 Pour the tequila into a small saucepan and bring to a boil. Cook until the tequila is reduced by half (most of the alcohol boils off). Pour into a bowl and stir in all the remaining ingredients. Refrigerate until cold.
- 2 Pour the chilled mixture into an ice-cream maker and process according to the manufacturer's instructions for sorbet. Store in the freezer.

Simple Syrup

Cooking time: 5 minutes

Yield: 2 cups

1¼ cups sugar

1¼ cups water

Combine the sugar and water in a saucepan and bring to a boil, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Let cool. Store the syrup in the refrigerator.



